

# BLACKGUARD







00027888064

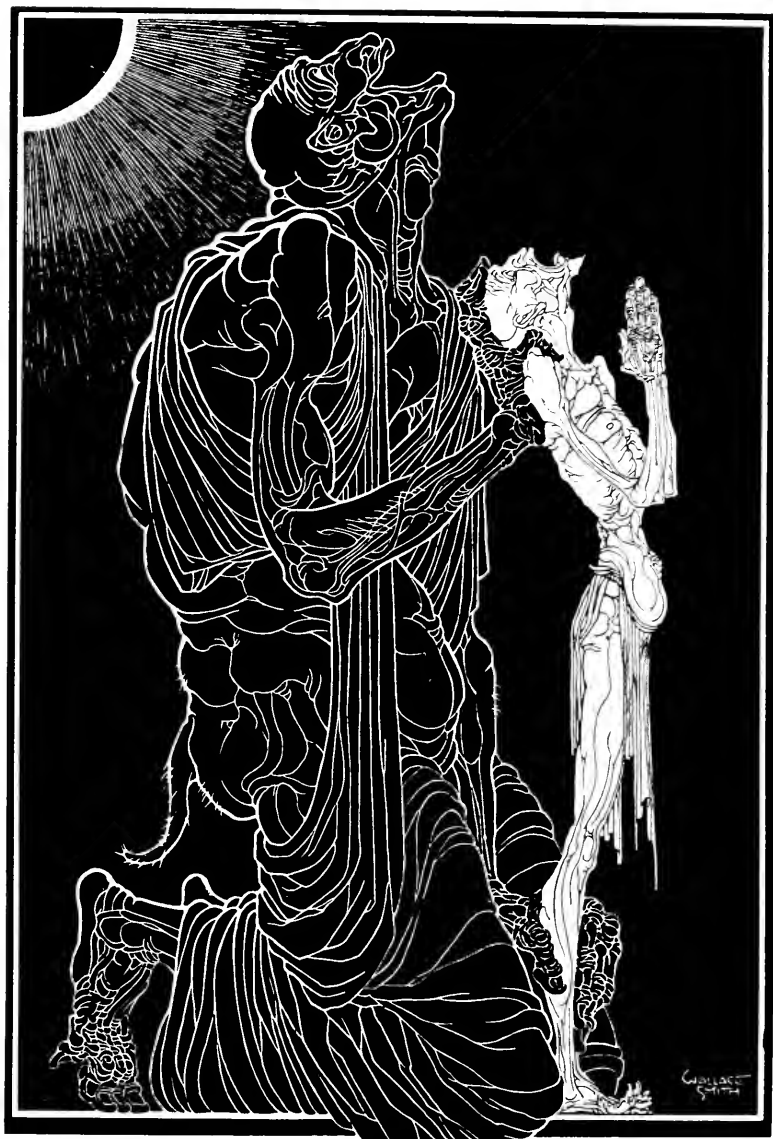
[illegible]













# BLACKGUARD

by  
Maxwell  
Bodenheim



drawing by  
Wallace Smith

CHICAGO  
COVICI-McGEE • PUBLISHERS •  
1923

Copyright 1923  
Covici-McGee  
Chicago

*First Printing, March, 1923*

## CONTENTS



### PART ONE

The Struggle . . . . . Page 1

### PART TWO

The Knife . . . . . Page 121

### PART THREE

Instigation . . . . . Page 181



PART I

THE STRUGGLE



# The Struggle

## CHAPTER I.



CARL Felman stepped from a train at the Union Station of a mid-western, American city. His young face, partly obscured by a blonde stubble of beard, was a passive concealment, and his thin lips and long nose did not hold that stalwart sleekness which one associates with earth. If some joker had taken a Gothic effigy of Christ, trimmed its beard, dressed it in grey and dirty clothes, and forced upon it an unwilling animation, he would have produced an exact duplicate of Carl's aspect and gestures.

In the emotional confusion of the railroad-station, with its reluctant farewells and gushing greetings, Carl walked alone and abstracted, and he treated the scene as though it were a feverishly unreal mixture of drama and travesty. He strode with the careful haste of one who seeks

## BLACKGUARD

to escape from an irritating dream but knows at the same time that his efforts are futile. He was without baggage, and his face held the strain that comes from battling with open spaces and strange faces—the hunted question of the hobo. His face showed two masks, one transparent and passive and the other tense and protesting. He had ridden for thirty-six hours in the chair of a day-coach, without food or sleep, and he was walking to the home of his parents because he lacked the necessary car-fare, but these circumstances were only partly responsible for his air of spectral weariness. He knew the stunned exhaustion of a man whose mind and heart had broken their questions against unfriendly walls, and at intervals he became immersed in vain efforts to understand the meaning of his wounds.

During the twenty-one years of his life he had resembled an amateur actor, forced to play the part of a troubled scullion in a first act that bewildered and enraged him. At high-school he had been known as “the poet-laureate of room sixteen,” a title invented by snickering pupils, and his timidly mystic lyrics about sandpipers, violets, and the embracing glee of the sun, had gained an unrestrained admiration from his English teachers. Teachers of English in American high-schools



## BLACKGUARD

are not apt to insist upon originality and mental alertness in expression, since their own lives are usually automatic acceptances of a minor role, and Carl became convinced that writing poetry was only a question of selecting some applauded poet of the past and imitating his verse. "You must say the inspiring things that they have said, but see that your words are a little different from theirs," he said to himself, and his words—"a little different"—became slightly incongruous upon the thoughts and emotions of Tennyson and Longfellow, the latter two having been selected because they seemed easier to flatter than other poets such as Browning and Swinburne. Another Carl Felman watched this proceeding from an inner dungeon but lacked the courage to interrupt it, for to a boy the opinions of his teachers, delivered with an air of weary authority, seem as inexorable as the laws of the Talmud or the blazing sincerity of sunlight. Carl was nearing seventeen at this time—a lonely, vaguely rebellious, anaemic, dumbly sullen boy, who tried in his feeble way to caress the life-chains which he did not dare to break. His parents, middle-aged Jews with starved imaginations and an anger at the respectable poverty of their lives, looked upon his poetic desires with mingled feelings of elation and uneasiness.

## BLACKGUARD

The phenomenon of an adolescent poet in the family is always liked and distrusted by simple people—liked because it pleasantly teases the monotone of their existence, and distrusted because they fear, without quite knowing why, that it will develop into a being at variance with the fundamental designs of their lives. Carl's parents clucked their tongues in puzzled admiration when he read them one of his poems, and then, with a note of loquacious fear in their voices, told him that he must look upon writing as a "side-line"—a pretty, lightly smirking distraction that could snuggle into the hollows of a business-man's life. Carl, who liked the importance of carrying secret plots within him, did not answer this suggestion, or gave it a sulky monosyllable, and his reticence frightened his parents. The simple person is reassured by garrulity, even when it attacks but can derive nothing from silence save the feeling of an unseen dagger. The Felmans wanted their son to attain the money that had seduced and eluded their longings, but deeper than that, they yearned for him to place a colored wreath over the brows of their tired imaginations—one that could convince them that their lives had not been mere sterile and oppressed bickerings. The father, a traveling-salesman for a whiskey-firm,

## BLACKGUARD

wanted Carl to be prosperous and yet daring over his cups while the mother felt that he might become a celestial notary-public, placing his seal upon the unnoticed documents of her virtues.

Carl experienced the uncertain dreads of a dwarf futilely attempting to squirm from a ring of perspiring golden giants known to the world, and not even sure of whether he ought to escape, but knowing only that a vicious and unformed ache within him found little taste for the flat-footed routines of clerk or salesman. Upon another planet this initial writhing is doubtless offered the consolation of better compromises, but the treadmill uproars of this earth merely increased Carl's feelings of shrinking anger.

"Oh, well, I'll work in a store or sell something, and make money. Life won't let you do anything else," he said to himself. "But inside of me, m-m, there I'll do as I please. I'll make a country where poets and other begging men live in little huts on the obscure hills and rear their families of thoughts and emotions, with a haughty peacefulness."

He shunned the people around him as much as possible, studying his lessons in a precisely weary manner and squatting on the grass of a public park near his home where he wrote his dimly

## BLACKGUARD

placid lyrics to the sun and moon. He had no companions at school, for the children around him were quick to jibe at any remark of his that contained a searching wraith of thought, and he did not join in the school's minor activities because of his angry pride at the giggling accusations of queerness which he received from the other boys and girls. They regarded him for moments as an enticing target, reviling his exact grammar and mild manners, but for the most part they paid little heed to this grotesque atom lost in the swirl of their games and plans. In a smaller school the strident inquisitiveness of average children thrown upon each other might have overwhelmed him, but in the immense city high-school he managed effortlessly to isolate himself, and the children, once having dubbed him poet-laureate—sarcastically mimicking the phraseology of their elders—proceeded to forget about him.

When at length he was graduated, he begged his parents to send him to college, desperately fighting for another long period in which he could brush aside dry information and rhyme "earth" with "birth," since he preferred the frolic of misty promises to a world of prearranged shouts and sweating dreads. But his parents felt that their period of uneasy indulgence had inevitably

## BLACKGUARD

ended, and words trooped from them in righteously redundant regiments.

"You're a big boy now, yes, a big boy, and you know that we've sacrificed everything to give you a good education," said Mrs. Felman. "Not that we regret it, no indeed, we only hope that it helps you to get along in life, but this college stuff, now, is a lot of foolishness. That's only for people with rich parents, or them that can afford to go a long time without working; and not only that, but it fills your head, you know, with a lot of nonsense. It's time now that you go out and make money to help your parents. You know that we're just barely able to get along on what your father makes. Not that we're begging you for your help, you understand, but you should be only too proud to give comfort to your parents. Uncle Emil can use a smart boy like you in his clothing business and he told us only the other night that he'd give you a good job the minute you come down. You've got to give up those writing notions of yours! They don't bring you in anything, and a man must go out into the world and make his own living. Writing is no business for a strong, sensible boy!"

Carl listened with a feeling of impotent anger. Yes, they were probably right in their commands

## BLACKGUARD

and he would be a scoundrel if he refused to obey them and rescue them from their poverty; but—well, he preferred to be a scoundrel. “Beyond a doubt I’m a lazy, ungrateful wretch, and all that I care for is to put words together—that seems to relieve me somehow—but say, how about sticking to what I am?” he asked himself. “I know perfectly well that I’ll never change, and if I make a liar out of the rest of my life that won’t make me any the less guilty. Besides, it’s funny, but I don’t know whether I want to change. There’s something satisfactory about being a scoundrel—it lets you do the things that you want to do; while being good, as far as I can see, is just pretending that you like to do the things that you don’t want to do. Well, I’m not going to stand for that! I’ve got to choose between hurting my parents and hurting myself and they are going to be the victims. This will be mighty selfish, I know, but I guess I’m a naturally selfish person. Anyway, I don’t feel much love for them and I don’t see that it will help them if I try to hide my feelings. They would find out sooner or later what an inhuman person I am and they might as well find out now.”

Carl answered the verbose commands and advice of his parents with a mechanical “yes” now and

## BLACKGUARD

then—a small shield to protect the inner unfolding of his thoughts—and walked into his bedroom, where he rested his dull broodings upon a pillow. The lives of some men represent a scale of gradually increasing compromises with, or victories against, the forces surrounding them, while other men crowd their decision into one early moment and walk swiftly down an unchanging road. The boy with Carl died upon the bed in his room and the fumbling, stiffly vindictive beginning of a man rose and walked into the street, with an evil smile petrifying the softness of his face. In this emotional birth he became to himself a huge black criminal staggering beneath the weight of unreleased plots, and he derived an angry joy from this condition, reveling in the first guilty importance that had invaded his meekly repressed life.

With the inquisitive grin of one who is quite convinced that he is an embryonic monster, he arose at five o'clock on the next morning, stole into the bedroom of his sleeping parents, pilfered fifteen dollars from the trousers of his father, and took the train to a distant city, where he enlisted in the United States Army. He had first intended to do this at the nearest recruiting station, but with the triumphant shrewdness of a budding

## BLACKGUARD

knave he decided that if he joined the army in another city he could more easily escape being arrested for his theft. He had robbed his parents with an actually quivering delight, feeling that it was the first gesture of his attack upon an unresponsive world. In joining the army he had not been lured by the recruiting poster's gaudy lies concerning "adventure, travel, and recreation," but his reasons were more practical and involved. He longed for the stimulus of a physical motion that would not be concerned with the capture of pennies and he believed that he could be more alone with himself in a new whirlpool than in the drably protected alcove from which he had fled. He felt also that if he were going to prey upon the world he must make haste to learn the tricks and signals of a rogue and pay for this knowledge with physical pain and weariness.

The details of his army life need not interfere with this quickly sculptured hint of his birth. He emerged from the lustreless workshop of the army with the patient bitterness of one whose dreams have become the blundering slaves of a colorless reality. For some time he wandered about the country, in a stumbling dance with various kinds of manual labor—cotton picking, wood chopping, factory work. At intervals he engaged in little



## BLACKGUARD

thefts, such as the money from a drunken man's pockets, the purses of rooming-house landladies, and articles from the counters of shops, and used them for a week or two of leisure in which he wrote of nightingales inebriated with the fragrance of lilac bushes, or dawn robbing the hills of their favorite shawl.

His role of desultory sneak-thief failed to cause within him the slightest shame or self-reproach and he felt that his longings were using trivial weapons in a furtive manner merely to protect a secretly delicate bravery within him.

"I don't care whether the world is filled with poets or not," he sometimes said to himself. "If it were, I might want to be a carpenter or a clerk then and make that my form of rebellion. I don't know. But the world wants to be filled with carpenters and clerks, and it's not as fair as I am. The unfairness makes me angry and I strike against it. . . . You must guard your only reason for living. All that I want to do is to keep on writing, and since no one cares to pay me for this kind of work I'll have to arrange for the payment myself. When I do hard work during the day I'm too tired to write at night, and the only way in which I can get leisure time for writing is to steal. If this is evil, it's been forced upon me.

## BLACKGUARD

Of course, I'd much rather steal out in the open, but that would instantly bring me to jail. No, this complicated game known as a world is unaware of my existence and I must be equally absent-minded in my own attitude."

His youthful gesture of contorted cynicism, qualified a bit by the remaining ghosts of a naively wounded idealism, made him resolve to become a crafty underdog — a man who had become obsessed with the task of finding his voice and was using every possible subterfuge and device to protect this obsession, leering at the forces that were attempting to intrude upon his religious concentration. Right and wrong to him were unfair scarecrows that slipped from the huge indifference of his surroundings and demanded an attention which they were unwilling to give in return. Perhaps he was a minor knave, seeking to rationalize his instincts for crime, and perhaps he merely held a naked determination like that of a certain immoral slayer and plunderer known as Nature. The question is a frayed one and derives little benefit from the tensions of exhausted arguments. Carl was constantly harassed by a feeling of inarticulate insignificance, and the poems which he twisted from his heart, on park benches and in the long weeds of ditches

## BLACKGUARD

beside railroad tracks, were like bunches of forget-me-nots plucked by a dirty, bewildered child and thrown as offerings against the stone breast of an unheeding giant. He still believed that poetry was a cloak of blurred embroidery that should be cast over the shoulders of sentiments such as love, faith, charity, mercy, chivalry, courage and honor, and he felt both consoled and amused at the thought that he was using a rogue to guard within himself the better man that life had not allowed him to become. His love for the sentiments which he tipped with rhymes was partly caused, however, by the fear that without them he might become too utterly inhuman for earthly survival.

For a year he wrestled with different manual labors, and stole when their perspiring monotones weakened and angered his desire to write lyrics that were half trite and half thinly wistful, but he finally decided to return to the midwestern city and brave the reactions of his parents, whose wrathful letters had sometimes visited his journeys. He determined to rest awhile amid the moderate comforts of his former home and felt that he could disarm the anger of his parents with a masterful, jesting attitude that would

## BLACKGUARD

muzzle them. And so, penniless and in dirty clothes, he was now walking through the heavily tawdry business district of a midwestern city.

## BLACKGUARD

### CHAPTER II.

On the streets martyred by crowds, electric lights pencilled the night with their trivial appeals, and an ineffectual approach to daylight spread its desperately dotted jest over the scene. Since Carl almost never voiced his actual thoughts and emotions to people, he grasped, as usual, the luxury of speaking to himself.

"Electric light is only the molten fear of men," he said, as he strode through the unreal haste of the crowds. "Men are afraid to look at the night and they have given it eyes as stiffly frightened as their own. Underneath the comforting glare of this second blindness they protect themselves. In a dim light men and women could not easily escape from each other, for the darkness would tend to press them together, but in this violent stare of light they are divided by a self-assured indifference. Watch them as they stride along with an air of gigantic, amusing importance. The crowd is really a single symbol of many isolations joined to a huge one. It sees only those people who are unpleasantly conscious of

## BLACKGUARD

the electric glare, and who hurry through it with gestures of alert dislike, or with a slow and morbid desire for pain."

This fancy made him feel conspicuously disrobed, and the glances of passing people became to him flitting symbols of derision directed at his beard and dirty clothes. As he looked up at the tall, unlit office buildings, grey and narrowly vertical, they reminded him of coffins standing on end and patiently waiting for a civilization to crumble, so that they might inter it and fall to the ground with their task completed. He reached the apartment-house section in which his parents lived—rows of three and four-story buildings almost exactly like each other, and standing like factory boxes awaiting shipment, but never called for. In front of each building was a little, square lawn hemmed in between the sidewalk and the curbstone—tiny squares of dusty green lost in a solved and colorless problem in material geometry. Carl greeted them with a gesture of ironical brotherhood as he hurried along the walk, while people, observing his downcast gaze and saluting hands, sometimes paused to doubt his sanity.

The glib suavity of a midsummer night sprin-

## BLACKGUARD

kled its sounds down the street and the doorsteps and walks were heavy with men, women and children, parading the uncomfortable drabness of their clothes and unwinding their idle talk. In pairs and squads, youths and girls strolled past Carl, laughing and playing to that exact degree of animal abandon tolerated by the street lights of a civilization, and sometimes crossing the forbidden boundary line, with little bursts of guilty spontaneity. Amid the openness of the street they were forced to become jauntily evasive of the old sensual madness brought by a summer evening, and they sought the refuges of crudely taunting words, snickering withdrawals, and tentative invitations. They were sauntering toward the kittenish excitements of ice-cream sundaes, moving pictures, and kisses traded upon the shaded benches in a nearby public park. Thought had subsided in their heads to a kindly mist that clung to the rhythm of their emotions, though in the main, their minds were merely emotions that vainly strove to become discreet. Most people are incapable of actual thought, and thinking to them is merely emotion that calmly plots for more concrete rewards and visions.

Carl looked upon the people on the sidewalks with the attitude of an unscrupulous stranger.

## BLACKGUARD

and in his fancy he measured them for material gains and attacks, without a trace of warm emotion in his regard. To him they were merely alien figures busily engaged in deifying the five senses, and they mattered no more than shadowy animals blind to his aims and presence. He had long since frozen his emotions in self-defense and nothing could unloosen them save the timidly mystical lyrics which he wrenched from the baffled surfaces of his heart. During the four years of his life as a soldier and hobo he had often looked upon some of the darker and more rawly naked shades of sexual desire in the people around him, but after a first period of mechanical curiosity he had drawn aloof from what he considered a blind, shrieking, fantastic parade. "This wearisome game of advancing and retreating flesh, always trying to lend importance to an essential monotone, can go to hell," he had muttered to himself. "I'll yield to my sexual desires at rare intervals, but I'll do it in the brief and matter-of-fact manner in which a man spits into a convenient cuspidor." Women to him were simply moulds of dull intrigue, irritating him with their pretenses of animation and with the oneness of their appeal.

As he walked between the incongruities of hard



## BLACKGUARD

street surfaces and soft noises, everything around him seemed to be vainly trying to conceal a hollow monotone. Middle-aged and old people sat around the doorsteps of the box-like apartment-houses, and the circumscribed and hair's-breadth shades of intelligence and defeat on their faces were transparent over one color and shape. Each of these people strove to convince himself that his relaxation on this summer evening was a glittering honor conferred by hours of virtuous toil, though at times discontent suddenly raised their voices high in the air. It was as though they lifted musical instruments, gave them one helpless blow, and retired to apathy, scarcely aware of what they had done. Carl looked at them with a weary indifference that almost verged upon hatred, and hurried down the cement walk.

As he neared the apartment-house where his parents lived it suddenly occurred to him that the entrance might be decorated by people who would recognize him and comment upon his appearance and his abrupt return. The thought of their amused and veiled contempt, or their assumption of superior compassion, made him cringe a little and he turned to a side-street that led to an alley which extended behind the block in which his parents lived. He passed through the dismal rear

## BLACKGUARD

yard of beaten earth and ascended the wooden stairway. A negro janitor, who had been working in this place for several years, gazed at him, at first with suspicion and then with a slowly pitying grin of recognition.

"'Lo, Mistah Felman. What brings you-all back here?"

Carl affected an irritated aloofness.

"I came back to enjoy a little shame," he said.

"What dat last word you said?"

"Shame, shame," repeated Carl, frowning at the man.

"Guess you-all's crazy," said the negro, throwing up his hands and stumping away.

This was one of Carl's favorite tricks. Whenever he desired to avoid a forced exchange of commonplaces, or the threat of a humiliation, he would speak in a cryptic fashion that aroused bewilderment or annoyance in the person before him and helped him to end the conversation. He found that the rear door of the apartment was locked and knew that his parents were visiting an adjacent moving-picture theater or sitting outside on the tiny lawn. Happily, he eyed the open window and remembered how often in the past his mother had scolded his father for that enormous crime. Ah, the windows in their minds were well

## BLACKGUARD

nailed and shaded. He felt relieved at the knowledge that he could probably sit for an hour or two and rest before they returned. He climbed through the window with the jocose satisfaction of a criminal whose mock-hanging has been postponed, and sat on a weak-jointed rocking-chair in the small dining-room.

Not a fraction of change had come to the cluttered dullness of the room. He saw the same rickety table of round oak, where an inferior circle was displaying with mild pride an embroidered square of white linen; the modest and orderly showing of cut-glass and silverware—tinsel of an old defeat—; the plaster-of-paris bust of an Indian, violently colored and bearing an artificial scowl; the mantelpiece that held a little squatting Chinaman made of colored lead and the bric-a-brac effigy of a doll-like courtier in washed out pinks and blues. On the wall opposite him a brass clock, moulded into crude cherubs intertwined with stiff blossoms, busily spoke of itself, forgetful of the time that it was supposed to measure, and little prints of uncertain landscapes hung in golden frames upon the wall-paper that was stamped with heavy purple grapes against a tan background. Carl shuddered as though he were in the midst of

## BLACKGUARD

a weak and disorganized nightmare, in which reality was indulging in a hackneyed burlesque at its own expense, and he crashed his fist upon the oak table.

"Damn it, I'll get out of this some day," he shouted, craving the sharp relief of sound, and then he grinned at the clumsy futility of his explosion.

"If you ever do manage to escape from this conspiracy of barren peace and flat lies it won't be with angry noise," he said to himself. "A vicious calmness will help you more."

He extracted a soiled roll of pencilled, smudged papers from an inside pocket of his coat and stroked them as though they were a gathering of living presences. The paper became smooth skin to him and he questioned it with his fingers. This reaction was not a sensual one but sprang from his longing for a reality that had so far eluded his consciousness. His poems, peeping with eyes of fanciful promises above the veils that redeemed their faces, were more concrete to him than actual flesh and breath.

## BLACKGUARD

### CHAPTER III.

He sat in the rocking-chair, tired and vaguely oppressed, clutching the paper in the manner of one who clings to a tangible encouragement in the midst of fantastic lies and fists. His parents came into the room at last and turned on an electric light without at first noticing him in the semi-gloom. Turning, his mother saw him in the chair. Her hands flew to her breast, in two tight slants, as she impulsively pictured the presence of a bearded burglar, and then she recognized him and insulted her emotions with a cross between a gasp and a squawk.

"It's Carl! Carl! For God's sake, when did you come in?"

"About an hour ago, through the window that father always leaves open," said Carl, waiting with a poised and resigned smile for the inevitable cannonade.

His father came in from the kitchen, where he had gone for a drink of water. Seeing Carl, he slowly challenged him with sleepily prominent eyes.

## BLACKGUARD

"S-o-o, s-o! You're back here again," he said. "I always said that you would come back. I knew you would get tired of bumming around. I knew it. Well, you loafer, what do you want from us now? Some more money out of my pants-pockets, maybe? You're a son that I should be proud of; oh, yes!"

"Yes, and a fine condition he comes back in," said Mrs. Felman, who was beginning to be angry at herself because she was not quite as wrathful at Carl as she felt that she should have been. A louder voice might supply this missing intensity. "A fine condition! Look, will you, at his shoes, and his clothes, and the beard on his face. A nice specimen to be trotting back to his parents after four years! When he needs us he comes back, oh, sure, but we wasn't good enough for him when he ran away and stole our money. We should tell him to go right back where he came from. Right back!"

She sat down with an air of stifled indignation that strained in its effort to capture an actual condition, and with many gasping words she tried to piece together the image of an inexplicable reptile. She was a woman whose emotions, garrulously bitter because of the material strait-jackets in which they had writhed for years, were

## BLACKGUARD

ever determined to exalt their bondage, if only to win relief from pain. Carl had always been an evil enigma to her, one that was at times half guessed—the accusing finger of her youth, sometimes barely discerned through the mist of lost desires. To escape these momentary exposures she had often swung the blindness of an anger that was directed as much at herself as at Carl. The father, however, had obliterated his past self with a more jovial carelessness and had stolen the consoling fumes of many taverns, so that he felt little need for the shrouds of loud noise.

“Well, at least you showed good sense in coming through the back way,” he said, looking at his son with a mixture of wonder and humorous contempt. “You would have made a fine sight for the neighbors on the front steps! We would never have heard the last of it. Noo, noo, what did you come back for? If it’s just to play your old tricks again, you can walk right out of here, I tell you. I’ll stand for no more nonsense from you. Turn over a new leaf and you’re welcome here, but no more of your writing, and fancy talk, and high notions!”

“Look at him,” said Mrs. Felman. “Sits there like a piece of wood! Have you nothing to say for yourself? Why, you haven’t told us how-do-

## BLACKGUARD

you-do. Inhuman! I don't see how I ever gave birth to such a creature as you."

Carl had been sitting like a stone figure, dressed by the playful passerby known as Life and yet absolutely void of life. His mute indifference had seduced all suggestions of flesh from him and even his blonde beard and hair seemed pasted upon an effigy. Finally the clever semblance of emotion returned to his body and sent an experimental tremble to see whether the flesh was prepared to receive another animated disguise. His hands twitched as though they were striving to overcome their paralysis in an effort to obey some powerful signal. As he listened to the jerky tirades of his parents—sterility seeking to regain a fertility by the use of a staccato voice—part of him wanted to cringe and win the convulsive shield of tears, while another part longed to bound from the insipid, brittle room and glide aimlessly into the night. The cringing mountebank, unfairly aided by physical fatigue, won this inner skirmish, and Carl decided to silence the anger of his parents by speaking to them in a way that would make them bewildered, since bewilderment is but a shade removed from frightened respect. It was the only pitiful little stunt that could offer him a small respite from the poverties of noise that were



## BLACKGUARD

assailing him—the favorite purchase of Indian medicine-men, Druid priests, circus barkers and other childlike charlatans.

“You see, the situation has been complicated,” he answered slowly, with the voice of a loftily enervated teacher. “Complicated. I have tried to save a possible poet from death—always a noble but redundant proceeding—but it seems that his skin must burn. I’ve come back now to make his coffin and stud it with gold. Gold would seem to be a favorite metal of yours, my dear parents. Surely you will be satisfied now. And it is also possible that you may help me with the funeral arrangements, since this burial, unlike plebeian ones, may extend over several years. And what else do you want me to say? I have so many acrobatic words and they would love to perform for you, but I am tired to-night. True, I am a rascal. Can you forget that embarrassing challenge for one evening?”

He broke his stonelike repose into one forward motion as he leaned toward his parents, turning upon them the prominently somnolent eyes that had been the sole gift from his father’s face, and smiling like an exhausted but lightly poised angel. His parents were stunned, for their indignant assurance had suddenly recoiled from an unex-

## BLACKGUARD

pected, blank wall. They could not quite understand his words and yet they felt that he was mocking them. The gracious glibness of his voice dwarfed them with the mystery of its meanings. This monster was not ashamed of himself—what could it signify? But, after all, it was rather difficult to be angry at a man when you were not quite sure whether his words were flattering or sneers. Carl rose abruptly from the chair. Now he controlled the situation for a time. He kissed his mother's forehead lightly and smiled at his father.

"I'm tired and hungry," he said. "A little food and sleep will fix me up, though, and to-morrow I'll look for work of some kind."

"Crazy, crazy, just like he always was," said his father, turning away with a partly appeased and patient manner. After all, one must give the proper blend of pity and tolerance to one who is truly insane.

The face of his mother held a virtuous impatience that made her large nose go up and down like a see-saw, and on the see-saw a dash of reluctant tenderness rode.

"I'll get you something from the ice-box," she said. "You're still so young—twenty-two you'll be next week—and we may yet live to be proud

## BLACKGUARD

of you. If you'll only get rid of your funny writing notions and your stealing ideas. My God, what a combination!"

Afterwards, as Carl ate, they sat at the kitchen table with him. Mrs. Felman was tall and strong, with a body on which plumpness and angles met in a transfigured prizefight of lines. The long narrowness of her face was captured by a steep nose slightly hooked at the top and her thin lips were not unlike the relics of a triumphant sneer. Even when they tried to be satisfied they never quite lost their expression of tight gloating. Above her high cheek-bones her eyes were bitter tensions of light, and a remnant of greyish-brown hair receded from the moderate and indented rise of her forehead. Her skin, once pink, was now roughly florid, like a petal on which many boots have been scraped and cleaned. Mr. Felman was her violent refutation. Short and hampered by plumpness, the large roundness of his face held the smirking emphasis of a greyish-red moustache, huge and clipped at the ends. His thick lips blossomed uncompromisingly over his fair double chin, and his low forehead, madly scratched by a plowman, stood between the abrupt curve of his small nose and a ruff of dark red hair pestered by grey. An expression of carelessly

## BLACKGUARD

earthly humor, banqueting on shallowness, fitted snugly upon his face and only his eyes, bulging with sleep, brought a metaphysical contradiction. He watched his son with a lazy, half-curious pity.

"Noo, what have you been doing all this time?" he asked.

"I left the army a year ago. You know, I wrote to you then and found out that you still lived here. That was very kind of me, I'm sure. Since then I've knocked about in different towns. Sleep and work, work and sleep—the twin brothers of man's inadequacy."

"Ye-es, still using long words, the twin brothers of something or other," said Mrs. Felman, with a light disapproval. "Learn to talk and act like other people and you'll be better off. I used to think a little different when I was young, but believe me, you can't get along by just dreaming and talking to yourself. The trouble with you is that you got a lot of fancy words and no get-up."

"Philosophical discourse number sixty-two," answered Carl, in the drowsily chanting voice of a train announcer. "Or have I lost count of them? Your life hasn't made you very happy, mother, and perhaps that's why your arguments are lacking in the swagger of conviction. Or perhaps you

## BLACKGUARD

think that it's best to be unhappy, and in that case I agree with you."

"Well, I wouldn't lower myself by trying to argue with you," said Mrs. Felman. "I'm perfectly right in everything I say, but I simply don't know how to fiddle with words like you do."

"Have you still got those poetry ideas in your head?" asked Mr. Felman. "Poetry is no business for a strong, grownup man. It's a lot of foolishness good for women and children!"

"If you could write things that make money now," said Mrs. Felman. "Why, only the other day Mrs. Benjamin was telling me she has a cousin who writes love stories for the Daily Gazette. Nice stories that make you laugh and cry. And this girl gets twenty dollars apiece for them, too."

"Now, now, don't be trying to encourage him again," said Mr. Felman. "Ain't we had enough trouble over this writing of his? Let him go out and get a regular job, like other men!"

Carl laughed, and his laugh was like an emotion interviewed by carbolic acid, and his parents eyed him with an offended surprise.

"Still squabbling over the bones," he said, with a sarcastic apathy. "If you were more delicate you might realize that it is inappropriate to argue

## BLACKGUARD

at a funeral. I'm only a tongue-tied fool, but I seem very elusively inarticulate to you because you're even more tongue-tied. And now, as usual, you haven't understood a word of what I've said."

"Well, you don't have to laugh at your parents," said Mrs. Felman, with an air of pin-pricked dignity. "You never did show any respect for us, in spite of all that we've done for you. Never."

"Say, Carrie, you'll have to get a suit for him. Something cheap, you know, at Pearlman's," said the father. "He'll never get a job in those rags of his."

"Money, money," said Mrs. Felman in a mechanically mournful voice. "All I do is spend money. It's terrible."

The sound of an opening door invaded the flat tom-tom of their talk.

"It's Al Levy," said Mrs. Felman, with fear in her voice. "It would be a shame now if he saw Carl in this condition. Hurry, hurry, Carl, to the bathroom before he comes in here. Your father's razor is on the shelf and I'll get you a clean shirt from the ones you left behind. Maybe they still fit you, as I was always careful to buy them a size too large."

Carl felt like an ignoble marionette who was being hastily mended behind the curtain for fear

## BLACKGUARD

that he might cast ridicule upon the sleekly vacant play, and his emotions were evenly divided between amusement and contempt. Driving his heart and mind into a fitting blankness, he closed the bathroom door. Levy had a room in the Felman apartment and they treated him with an unctuous respect that almost verged upon an Oriental self-abasement. He was a man of twenty-six who worked for a wealthy uncle, received a large salary, and polished and scrubbed the limited essentials of a semi-professional man-about-town, with minor chorus girls and gamblers helping him to flatter microscopically the fatigue donated by his daily labors.

"Be very friendly to Al, please," said Mrs. Felman, as they all sat around the dining-room table. "He's a very smart man—works in the mail-order business, selling cheap jewelry to country people, and makes a pile of money. His seven dollars a week come in mighty handy to us, I can tell you."

"Dammit, all business is going good except whiskey," said Mr. Felman, as though he were inviting an elusive conspiracy to share the firmness of his tones. "These prohibition fanatics are ruining everything. The saloon-keepers are all afraid they're gonna be closed up, and they won't buy. I haven't sold a barrel in two days. I don't

## BLACKGUARD

know what the world's coming to with all these here prohibitions. People are entirely too busy telling each other what to do, and nobody minds his own business any more. . . . Well, anyway, Carl, there's still sample bottles for you to swipe from my overcoat pockets."

He said the last words with a bearish joviality, and had the expression of a bear who has paddled to within a mile of irony and is sniffing at the singular realm.

"Sol, don't remind me of his old wildness," said Mrs. Felman, with a peevish dread. "I still remember the time when he staggered along the sidewalk in front of all the neighbors. Is there anything bad that he hasn't done, I want to know?"

One evening, just before running away from home, Carl had taken some tiny bottles of whiskey from his father's overcoat, without curiosity, but longing for the feeling of sly self-assurance that had balanced his blood from former sneaking sips. He had repaired with the bottles to a neighboring public park and emptied them in swiftly nervous gulps, enjoying the vastly kinglike sneer at the world which had brushed aside his melancholy uncertainties.

"I am a poet!" he had cried out to the mur-



## BLACK GUARD

muring patience of the trees around him, "and fools will some day gape along my road, and the open circles of their mouths will be like the rims of beggars' cups. My voice will rise above the dreamless clink of their coins and they will stop and look at me, as though I were a pilgrim-problem. An angry amazement will lend its little catastrophe to their faces. Yes, I will drop beauty to them, in clearly abundant handfuls, and they will sit quarreling over its value and tossing me an occasional penny. But I will never stop to join their discourses. My feet will be lighter than breezes and more direct. I am a poet, and the world is stagnation that I must ever torment!"

He had lurched back to the Felman apartment, "dropping beauty" with an incisive exuberance to the astonished neighbors seated around the doorstep, and commanding them to examine his gifts. As he sat at the dining-room table now, he remembered this episode, and similar ones, with a gust of half-rebellious shame.

"This has been my only triumph so far—a whiskey bottle raised beneath the stars, on a summer evening, and reigning over an idle riot of words," he said to himself with an exhausted self-hatred. "Am I going to be contented with this thwarted joke? And yet——"

## BLACKGUARD

Levy stepped into the room and provided a slightly unwelcome ending to this secret sentence. Short and slender, his blue serge suit clinging to him like an emblem of shrewd victory, he made an excellent period to the labors of thought. Upon his small, light tan face a twirled-up black moustache curved to a diminutive swagger and his bending nose seemed to be vainly attempting to caress the moustache—an unnecessary affirmation. His black eyes incessantly drove little bargains beneath the shine of his black hair.

"H'llo, folks," he chirruped, smiling with an automatic ease at the Felmans. Then he noticed Carl and looked at him with polite surprise.

The father and mother regarded each other with a despondent indecision, dreading the thought of introducing their drolly disreputable son to this shining symbol of an outside world and hating the undeserved appearance of inferiority which had been thrown upon them. This queer son had cast his shadow upon their assured and humbly conservative position in life—in a world of decently balanced regularities. Their ability at loquacious pretense took up the burden with a weary precision.

"This is my son Carl," said Mr. Felman, with a prodigiously uneasy grin tickling the roundness

## BLACKGUARD

of his face. "Carl, this is Al Levy. You've heard us talking of him, Al. He's just come back from the army—surprised his old parents, you know."

"Glad to meet you, I'm sure," said Levy, with an expert affability beneath which he exercised his disdain for Carl's patched-up appearance and his inkling of the actual situation.

He complimented a chair at the table briskly; or, in other words, he sat down, employing a great condescension of limbs. He and Felman began an uncouth debate concerning the respective selling merits of whiskey and cheap jewelry, while Carl listened, bored and a little sick at the stomach. Words to these men were crudely unveiled mistresses, selling their favors for whatever hasty coin might be thrown on the table. Levy turned to Carl.

"How did you like the army?" he asked, with a lightly superior kindliness.

Carl nervously wondered what he should answer and bickered with his desire to return a curt indifference to this vaguely garnished mannikin. He decided to annoy the limited mind of the man in front of him and take a comforting wraith of revenge from this result—his customary device for such situations, always used to evade a language which he did not care to simulate. The

## BLACKGUARD

physical nearness of people made him snarl, for then his imagination found it more difficult to trifle with their outlines, and he would strive to drive them away with insult.

"The army is a colorless workshop, where men can forget their past and avoid gambling with their future," he said, in an aloofly professorial voice. "All of the hurried and obedient movements of a day in the army, like a little drove of dazed foxes, prevent a man from fully realizing his own insignificance, and at night there is always a nearby city in which the sorrowful illusion can be captured again. Oh, yes, the army is an excellent prison for men to whom life holds a fixed horizon—men whose hearts and minds have reduced curiosity to an ashen foothold."

Levy's brows bent to an unfamiliar process and perplexity slowly loosened his lips, but a feeling of irritated pride made him determined not to show his confusion to one whom he looked upon as a demented and windy subordinate. He knew that this "fancy fool" was attempting to parade a superior knowledge of English, thus creating a counterfeit of wisdom.

"Oh, I don't think that the army is as bad as all that," he said, in a glibly hurried voice, trying to assume an attitude of careless disagreement.

## BLACKGUARD

"I was a sergeant-major once in the National Guard, down in Tennessee, and we had a pretty good time of it, I'll tell you. It gave us all a splendid muscle and fine appetite, and it taught us to obey the commands of our superior officers without hesitating. You know, in life you've got to follow the orders of someone who knows more than you do, or you'll never get anywhere. Besides, we had a lot of intelligent men in our outfit. Why, my company commander was one of the best lawyers in Nashville."

"My planet is somewhat distant from yours. I was barely able to hear you," said Carl, amusedly. "Still, that doesn't mean that either of us is better or worse than the other. Your eyes are contented with what they see and mine are not. But it would not be very important to tell you of things that you have never missed."

Levy became involved in his cigarette smoking while he futilely asked his mind for an adequate and unconcerned retort. Mrs. Felman sensed his annoyance and felt hugely angry at her son for "not getting in right" with this splendid young business-man and for speaking in a manner that was mysteriously and trivially vexing.

"Ach, Carl always talks just like a hero in a story," she said, in an agitated effort at humorous

## BLACKGUARD

masquerade and hoping to smooth over the errors made by her freakish son. "Don't pay no attention to him. I can never understand him myself."

Levy, once more completely the successful man to his own vision, forgot the bite of the beetle, and turned to the elder Felman.

"How about a little game of rummy?"

"Carrie, get the cards," Felman answered, in quick tones of bright relief. "Carl will play—he always was a rummy shark and he never changes in anything. Such a stubborn boy! I bet you that forty years from now he'll be just as foolish as he ever was."

"Your optimism concerning the length of my life intrigues me," said Carl.

Ten-cent pieces were placed on the table and the cards were shuffled. To the other two men the card game would have lacked interest without the money to be battled for, not because of the tiny gain involved, but because their desires for relaxation were lacking in spontaneity and needed the pettily deliberate strokes of a familiar whip to encourage their birth. Whenever, on rare occasions, they romped upon some lawn, tossing a ball to a child, or read the lurid clumsinesses of some magazine, they showed a sheepish hesitation and hazily felt that they were wasting time that

## BLACKGUARD

belonged to the shrewd importance of barter and exchange. The presence of a coin upon a table, however, held a glint of the missing coquette. They swore elaborately and interminably at lost hands—"that queen would have given it to me"—flung down the paper oblongs with a tense elation when they were winning, and enjoyed the presence of a milder but still keen market-place. The gambling instinct is never anything more than the desire to seduce an artificial uncertainty from a life that has grown mildewed and pre-arranged—the monotone must be circumvented with little, straining devices. It pleased Carl to imitate the motions of the other two men, outwitting them at their own small game while still remaining a repulsed bystander, and sneaking a morsel of enjoyment from their genuine dismay at some defeat. After several games had been played the father yawned mightily, creating a noise that sounded like a Mississippi River steamboat whistle heard at a distance, poignant and full-throated. Perhaps with this yawn his soul signaled a complaint against the disgrace which this day had cast upon it—a nightly remonstrance unheard by his mind and heart. Levy, subdued and impressed by Carl's card-playing abilities, pelted him with commonplaces which he tried to

## BLACKGUARD

make as genial as possible, and Carl, too sleepy to be belligerent or aloof, gave him softly vague responses. Mrs. Felman, for the first time, looked out with heavy peace from behind the crinkling newspaper where she had been placidly nibbling at the perfumed logics of a latest divorce scandal. Her son had finally redeemed the evening by exhibiting a small but ordinary proficiency which drew him a little nearer to the dully efficient level of mankind, and her reflections upon his material future became a shade less hopeless.



## BLACKGUARD

### CHAPTER IV.

At an early hour on the following morning she hurried Carl to the business section of the city so that the neighboring women, who slept late after getting breakfast for their men, would not see him from their windows, and at a department store she purchased a cheap suit of clothes for him. He dressed behind a small screen in the store, feeling like a small, eccentric lamb who was being glossed for the market. She left him at an elevated railroad station, extracting a dollar from her pocketbook with an air of intensely solemn and reflective importance.

"Don't waste it now; I know your tricks," she said. "Be sure and get the afternoon paper and look through the want ads. Take anything at the start—don't be high-toned."

Carl gave her the necessary monosyllables of assent and walked down the street, his mind busy with many insinuations.

"Perhaps I'd better stop stealing for a while," he said to himself. "If I keep it up without an intermission it's going to land me in jail again

## BLACKGUARD

and I'm not anxious for that circumscribed travesty to happen. That term of three months in Texas gave me a great deal of time in which to write, but the little animals in that place intruded with a bite that was both wistful and inadequate. It's a little difficult to write about beauty and scratch your skin simultaneously—the proud stare of the former does not like to sit in the prison of a small irritation. It is an intricately adjusted equilibrium and the lunge of a finger nail can desecrate this subtly balanced aloofness. There is little difference between the bars of mind and actual iron rods, but when you are still partly inarticulate, physical motion can become a necessary recompense. No, for the time being I had better strain my hands in prayer against the tiny implements with which men felicitate their stupidity. Back and forth—but what else can I do?"

It was his habit to think only in metaphors and similes, and in this way he evaded the realities that would otherwise have crushed him. He walked down the street, practicing an emotion of stolid submission, and this surface humility played pranks with his blonde-topped head and made his thin lips loosely unrelated to the rest of his face. As he strode through the business district of the city, with its sun-steeped frenzies

## BLACKGUARD

of men and vehicles, the scene pressed upon him and yet was remote at the same time. It was as though he were studying a feverishly capering unreality and vainly striving to persuade himself that he formed a significant part of it.

The unrelenting roar of automobiles, wagons and cars became the laughable and inarticulate attempt of a dream to convince him that it held a power over his mind and body. Men and women darted past him with a rapidity that made them appear to be the mere figments of a magic trick. Here he caught the thick tension of lips, and there the abstracted flash of eyes, but they were gone before he could believe that they had interfered with his vision. He paused beside a dark green news-stand squeezed under the iron slant of an elevated-railroad stairway and strove to pin the scene to his mind and fix his relation to the people who were jesting with his eyes. Young and old, dressed in complications of timidly colored cloth, each seemed to be running an exquisitely senseless race in the effort to gain a nonsensical foot on the other person. The masked rush of their bodies deprived them of a divided sexual appearance and lure—men and women, touching elbows without emotion, were swept into one lustreless sex which darted in pursuit of a treach-

## BLACK GUARD

erously invisible reward. The entire structure around them—buildings, signs, and iron slabs—stood like a house of cards carefully supported by an essence that rose from the rushing people, and Carl felt that if these men and women were to become silent and motionless, in unison, the house of cards would instantly lose its meaning and tumble down.

“What are they gliding and stumbling toward?” he asked himself—the old, poignantly futile first question of youth. “Each man, with an ingenious treason, is trying to forget his inability at self-expression and soiling the void with an increasing burden that will prevent him from complaining too much. At some time in their lives all of these people felt, dimly or strongly, for a moment or for years, the ludicrous ache of a desire to stand out clearly against their scene, but the loaded momentum of past lives—the choked influence of past futilities—pushed them along with a force which they could not withstand. It is really a stream of adroitly dead men and women that is fleeing down this street—surreptitiously dead people living in the bodies of a present reality and perpetuating the defeated essence of their past lives.”

As he stood and watched the crowd he found it

## BLACKGUARD

necessary to ask himself the words: "What gave its slyly amused signal for this plaintive race through the centuries?"

He also found it necessary to answer: "A languid idiot, much in need of consolation, refuses to abandon his dream."

Here and there, apart from the main lunge of the crowd, were men and women, standing still, as though motion had betrayed them, or loitering in a carelessly placid fashion. Vacancy and indecision tampered with most of their faces.

"How many minor poets have stood upon these street corners, making arrangements for a gradual and unnoticed death?" he asked himself, with the sentimental self-importance of youth.

But the stage hands clamored that he was neglecting the play—a habit falsely known as laziness—and that, with appropriate cunning, they had erected this city scene so that he and hordes of others should find it difficult to forget their tamely borrowed lines. With an uncomplaining wrench he returned to his surface role of a youth sent out in weakly gruesome clothes to look for some task that would begin to answer the flatly strident requests of an average life. The humble stupor fell back upon his shoulders and he walked to a bench in a public square, seated himself, and read

## BLACKGUARD

the "want-ad" section of a newspaper. He spied, with a prostrate frown, the barren jest of: "Wanted—Young man for clerical work; must be neat, industrious, wide-awake, sober, well educated, reliable, good at details, ambitious, honest, painstaking; salary twelve dollars a week." He muttered certain useless words to himself. "The illusion of a reluctant penny for fresh vigor. If the applicant is morbidly patient and reasonably deft at following orders he may after many years attain the virtue of writing the same trivially unfair appeal to other men. And even that exquisite victory is uncertain."

He saw that as usual his only choice rested between an office-boy's task, dignified by the title of junior clerk to make it more enticing, and unskilled manual labor.

"Now, how will you become tired—mentally or physically?" he asked himself with great formality.

Abruptly, and in that conscious and secret plot which men insist upon calling subconscious, he peered at the picture of a black man and a white man throwing a wilted rose back and forth to each other and catching it without a trace of emotion. The little, ridiculous rose lost a petal after each catch, but in spite of its smallness

## BLACKGUARD

the number of petals seemed to be inexhaustible. At a distance the black and white man exactly resembled each other, but on approaching closer it could be seen that the black man held the face of an incredibly stolid ruffian, while the white man's face was engraved with the patience of a cowed child. Not being acquainted with psychoanalysis—that blind exaggeration of sexual routines—Carl did not believe, after he returned to the touch of the park bench, that this picture had slyly veiled the direction of his physical desires. He knew that a fantastic whim had slipped from his mind and induced him to probe his choice between two equally drab kinds of labor, striving to make this choice endurable for a moment.

He selected three advertisements, all of them asking for manual laborers, walked from the park, and boarded a street car. The first place that he visited was a box factory—a slate-colored crate of a building, bearing that flatly unexpectant tone that expresses the year-long mating of smoke and dirt. As he ascended the gloomy stairway an endless drone and clatter battled with his ears. It seemed a senseless blasphemy directed at nothing in particular—the complaint of a dull-witted, harnessed giant who was being driven on without

## BLACK GUARD

knowing why. Carl entered a huge room disheveled with sawdust and shavings and cluttered with black belts and wheels. Men with swarthy, motionless faces and feverish arms leaned over the wheels and saws. As he stood near the doorway, feeling dwarfed and uncertain, a man came toward him. Sturdy and short, the man looked like a magnified and absent-minded gnome, too busy to realize that civilization had played an obscene trick on him by stealing his fairy disguise and substituting the colorless inanities of overalls and a black shirt. The large and heavily twisted features on his face were partially hidden by a brown stubble of beard, and like all men who work forever in factories, he had an ageless air in which youth, middle age and old age were pounded into one dull evasion.

"What d'ya want?" he asked, the words jumbled to a bark.

"I'm looking for work. Saw your ad in the paper."

He examined the region between Carl's toes and cap, measuring the unimportance of flesh.

"We want good strong men to load boxes and carry lumber," he said. "You don't look like a man for the job, bo. You're dressed like a travelin'



## BLACKGUARD

salesman an' we want men who ain't afraid to get dirt on their clothes. Get me?"

"Don't mind this suit of mine," said Carl. "I have a much dirtier one at home and I'll be only too glad to wear it here. You see, I always feel more peaceful in dirty clothes, but someone played a joke on me and made me wear this suit."

"Well, you ought to come ready for work, if you're lookin' for it"—the man peered again at Carl.

"Nope. Nope. You ain't got the build for heavy work. We're after big, husky men. Sorry, Jack, but there's nothin' doin'."

"Say, be reasonable," said Carl. "I've done hard work off and on for the last four years and I'm much stronger than I look. Come on, give me a chance."

The man shook his head as his eyes received Carl's slender arms and narrow shoulders, and he did not know that this weak aspect concealed an inhuman amount of endurance. After another useless expostulation Carl walked out, grinning forlornly as he strode down the street. Cheated out of the phantom opiate of a beautiful box-piling job because of a deceptive physical appearance and a twenty-dollar suit, reduced to nineteen through the expert pleading of his mother! He

## BLACKGUARD

looked down with delicate aversion at the grey, neatly-pressed cloth which concealed his material humility with lines of dreamless confidence, and felt a sudden impulse to tear it off and go nakedly cavorting down the street, taking the cries of onlookers as a suitable reward, but that sleek caution born from rough faces and rougher hands chided him back to sanity. After calling at another factory and receiving the same refusal, he decided to wait until the morrow, when he could don his old, dirty clothes and avert suspicion.

The city turmoil was slackening, like a huge, human top beginning to spin weakly. The warm hardness of a summer evening between city streets tried a little laughter in an unpracticed voice, and revolving streams of men and women hid the pavements—a satiated army returning from an unsettled conflict. The scene was a mixed metaphor trying to straighten itself out. Feeling forlornly alert and useless in the midst of all this important exhaustion, Carl made his way home.

A group of neighbors sat with a clean and well-brushed peace around the doorstep. In the heat of the summer evening they seemed mere figures of slightly animated flesh, with their thoughts and emotions reduced to placidly con-

## BLACKGUARD

tented wraiths. Three middle-aged Jewish women sat in rocking chairs and knitted with an effortless incision, unaware of the spiritual prominence that is usually discovered in their race. Their bulky bodies censured the lightness of evening air and their deeply-marked brown faces were those of self-assured, thoughtless queens issuing orders to a tiny domain, with palmetto fans for scepters and rhinestone combs for crowns. Incessantly they chatted about the personal details of their daily lives, splitting these details into even smaller atoms and fondling the minute particles with a lazy relish. Children romped at their feet or brought some tiny request to their laps—children that seemed to be dreams of cherubic hilarity, released from the busy sleep of the middle-aged women and reproving it. Behind them, sitting on the stone steps, a middle-aged Jewish man glued his depressed weariness to a newspaper. The orderly sleekness of his clothes had met with the familiarity of a summer day and the rim of his once stiff collar, drenched with perspiration, made a pathetic curve around his fat, brown neck. His eyes were like flat discs of metal placed on each side of an enormous, confident nose. Noses express the spirit of people far better than lips and eyes, for they cannot be moved and changed

## BLACKGUARD

to suit the fears and desires of a person, but stand with an outline of uncompromising revelation. Their still silence is often the only sincerity upon a human face, and the nose of this man showed a strident green that was contradicted a bit by the drooping little indentations just above the nostrils, indicating that the man had his moments of self-doubt, but refused to yield to them.

It seemed incredible to Carl that these people were housing hearts and minds, for he could see them only as so many sterile lumps of flesh that were using every desperate trick to minimize the crawling shadow of their unimportant graves. Two of the women knew him and greeted him with an insincere and inquisitive cordiality.

"Wh-y-y, Mister Felman, when did you get back?" said Mrs. Rosenthal, the fattest of the group.

"I returned yesterday," answered Carl, injecting a great solemnity into his voice.

"Yesterday? Well, well. And did you have a nice time in the army? I've been told that it's really marvelous for a man—makes him so strong and healthy. And then all the traveling about, you know, must be so interesting."

"Oh, ye-e-es, it's a wonderful place," said Carl,

## BLACKGUARD

gravely mimicking her drawling voice. "Bands, and uniforms, and parades. It's really quite fascinating."

"Well, I'm so glad you liked it," said Mrs. Benjamin, another woman in the group, who felt that it was time to advance a well-placed sentence. "I want you to meet my husband. Mo, this is Mister Felman, who's just come back from the army."

"Glad t' meet yuh," said the man on the doorstep, blurring the words in a swiftly mechanical fashion, but looking very closely at Carl.

Carl returned the salutation in the same fashion, taking a shade of amusement from his parrot-like impulse. These hollow creatures—what else could one do save to imitate their mannerisms and ideas, for self-protection, and rob and defraud them at every opportunity, thus giving them a mild apology for existence? After another round of wary commonplaces he managed to break away. His mother met him at the door and he said "Hello" and was about to pass her when her sharp voice halted him.

"You haven't got an ounce of affection in you! A nice way to greet your mother! Hello, and he walks right by like I was some boy he met on the street."

For a moment Carl stood without answering.

## BLACKGUARD

This woman who had given birth to him—an incomprehensible chuckle of an incident—was almost non-existent to his emotions—a mere shadow that held an incongruously raucous voice and guarded one of the gates of his surface prison. As he stood in the hallway, doubting the reality of her shrill voice, he asked himself: "Am I an inhuman monster, unfit to touch this woman's dress, or am I a poet standing with candid erectness in an alien situation?"

Suddenly the question became unimportant to him and he felt that he had merely offered his inevitable self the choice between an imaginary halo and an equally fantastic strait-jacket. If his mother actually longed for an affection which he did not hold, it would be inexpensive to toss her the counterfeit coins of gestures and words. When she finished her staccato diatribe, he bowed deeply to her, with the palm of one hand lightly interrogating the buttons of his coat, raised her hand to his lips, and kissed it at great length.

"Na-a, go away with your silliness," she said. "I know you don't mean it."

Her narrow face loosened for a moment and a shimmer of compensation found her eyes. This queer son of hers might be faintly realizing, after all, the unselfish intensity of her efforts to give

## BLACKGUARD

him a position of honor and respectability in the world. Perhaps he was only wild and young, and would finally press his shoulders against the admired harness of material success. It could not be possible that one who had struggled from her flesh would remain a remote idiot and ignore the warm shrewdness within her that life had somehow swindled.

The elder Felman was reading his paper in the dining-room. He greeted Carl with a somnolent imitation of interest, but the heat, aided by a day spent in pungent saloons, had cheated him of most of his mental consciousness. He had become so thoroughly accustomed to drink that an artificial buoyancy scarcely ever invaded the dull ending of his days.

"We-e-ell, where did you go to-day?" he asked, feeling some slight craving for sound and trying to rouse his material anticipations.

He abandoned his seductive newspaper, with its melodrama that was pleasant because it murdered at a distance, and questioned Carl with his sleepy eyes.

"Went to a couple of factories, but the foremen were disgusted with the cut of my clothes," said Carl. "They felt that the wearing of a new and unwrinkled suit revealed an intelligence which

## BLACKGUARD

should not be possessed by an applicant for manual labor. I tried to convince them that the semblance was false in my case, but they refused to be persuaded."

"Always trying to joke. That won't get you anything. The main thing is—did you get work, or didn't you?"

"No, I did not. I applied for manual labor, but I forgot to put on overalls."

Mrs. Felman stood in the doorway and lifted a skillet in simple wrath.

"Factories he goes to!" she cried, in a voice that was not unlike the previous rattling of the skillet. "I bought him a new suit and shoes this morning so he could look for common, dirty work! It's terrible. Here we sent him to high-school for four years and his only ambition is to work as a common laborer."

The father smiled dubiously at her explosion.

"Now, Carrie, don't let all the neighbors know your business," he said. "Your holler is enough to drive anyone crazy. There's no harm in honest work, Carrie, and besides he'll soon get tired of sweating in factories and look for something decent. Don't worry."

"I guess anything will be better than that silly scribbling that's ruined his life so far," said Mrs.



## BLACKGUARD

Felman, her anger dwindling to a guttural sulkiness. Carl, who had been sitting with a suffering grin on his face, gave them soothing words and once more held them at arm's length.

## BLACKGUARD

### CHAPTER V.

In the dirty clothes that he had worn upon his arrival, qualified by a clean shirt, he went forth on the next morning and found work as a lineman's helper for a telephone company. He was required to climb up the wooden poles; hand tools to the lineman; unwind huge spools of wire; make simple repairs under the lineman's guidance. As he labored from pole to pole, down a suburban street, taking the impersonal whip of the sun and winning the pricks of insects on his sweat-dappled face, he felt dully grateful toward the physical orders that were crudely obliterating the confused demands of his heart and mind. As he toiled on, this dull feeling gradually rose to a self-lacerating joy. He revelled in the cheap vexations brought by his tasks—the unpleasant scraping of shins against iron rungs and the sting of dust in his eyes—and his self-hatred stood apart, delightedly watching the slavish antics of the physical mannikin.

Then, when this emotion paused to catch its breath it was replaced by a calmer one, and his

## BLACKGUARD

insignificance receded a bit, beneath the substantial lure of arms and legs that were moving toward a fixed purpose. "I am doing something definite now and that is at least a shade better than the indefinite uselessness of my thoughts," he mumbled to himself as he lurched from pole to pole. The slowly mounting ache of his muscles became a bitter hint of approaching peace and he looked forward to the moment when he would quit his labors and enjoy the returning independence of his body, as though it were a god's condescension. He worked quickly and breathlessly, as one who hurries to a distant lover's arms. Filled with a doggedly naive hatred for his own deficiencies, he welcomed this chance to insult them with disagreeable and infinitely humble postures, and he gladly punished himself underneath the violence of the sun. It was, indeed, a spiritual sadism deigning to make use of the flesh.

"Hey, Jack, take it a little easier," the lineman called down to him once. "Don't kill yourself at this job. It's too damned hot to work hard."

Carl gave him a beaten grin and moved his arms even faster while the lineman bewilderedly meditated upon this imbecility. The lineman was a burly young Swede with a broadly upturned

## BLACKGUARD

nose and thickly wide lips. His face suggested poorly carved wood. The blankness of his mind held few skirmishes with thought on this rasping afternoon and his mental images were confined to tools, stray glasses of beer, yielding pillows, and feminine contours—the flitting promises that held him to his day of toil. He possessed no human significance to Carl—he was a drably accidental automaton who shouted down the blessed orders that gave Carl little time for definite thoughts and emotions: an unconscious helper in the flogging of mind and soul.

As they walked down the street after the day's work Carl looked closely at him for the first time. Sweat and dirt were violating the youthful outlines of his face, and his small blue eyes were contracted and deeply sunk as though still directing the movements of his arms. The blunt strength of his body sagged beneath the colorlessness of clothes and his head was wearily bent forward—the grey frenzies of a civilization had exacted their daily tribute and it is possible that he was not aware of the glory and impressiveness which certain poets find in his cringing role. For a time Carl looked at him with an exhausted friendliness and felt tied to him by the intimate

## BLACKGUARD

bonds of confessing sweat and conquered toil, and this illusion did not vanish until he spoke.

"Me for beer and somethin' to eat," he said, with heavy anticipation. "A day shust like this'll take the guts outa any man. Come along, Jack, I'll stand treat for the suds. . . . An' say, lemme give ya a tip—don't overwork yourself out on this job. It don't pay. You won't get a cent more at the end of the week. Do whatcha gotta do but take it kinda easy. Kinda easy. The boss is too busy most of the time to notice who's doin' the most work an' unless you loaf on the job you can get by without killin' yourself."

The complacent roughness of his voice, divided by the shallow wisdoms of the underdog, destroyed the feeling of tired communion which Carl had been sheltering, and his exhaustion began to creep apart from the man, like a tottering aristocrat. He was once more a proudly baffled creator, shuffling along after a day of useless movements, and his hatred for human beings awoke from its short sleep and brandished a sneer on his loose and dirt-streaked face.

He walked into a corner saloon with Petersen and gulped down a glass of beer. Its cool interior kiss aroused a bit of vigor within him and he looked around at the men who were amiably fight-

## BLACKGUARD

ing to place their elbows on the imitation mahogany bar. Their faces were relaxed and soiled, heavily betraying the aftermath of a day of toil, and an expression of brief elation teased their faces as they swallowed the beer and whiskey and licked their lips. After each drink they stood with blustering indecision, like generals striving to forget a menial dream and regain their command of an army, or quietly tried to erase the blunders and supplications of a day, seeking nothing save the solace of lazy conversation and weakly clownish arguments. The strained, corrupt clamor of voices debating over women, prize-fighters, and money swayed back and forth and was timidly disputed by the whir of electric-fans and the clink of glasses. A wave of sleepy carelessness stormed Carl as he watched these men. Inevitably thrown in with them, as a sacrifice to a dubious reality, he felt inclined to copy their actions and inanely insult his actual self, since at this moment all words and gestures seemed equally futile to him.

"What essential difference is there between a poet, boasting of his reputation, and a workman bragging about the women who have allowed him to molest their bodies?" he asked himself, forcing the question out of the drained limpness of his mind. "The poet has taught better manners to

## BLACKGUARD

his vanity, with many an inquisitive artifice, while the other man is more natural and clumsy."

Petersen's voice interrupted the soliloquy.

"Come on, have another."

"Make it whiskey this time," said Carl to the bartender. "I'll pay for this one, Petersen."

"Keep your money, keep it," answered Petersen, warmed by his beers to an insistent generosity. "I got plenty of it. But say, I'll be a little shorter in kale tuhnight when Katie gets through with me. There's no way of spendin' money that that dame don't know, but I guess all women are like that. They make you fly some to get 'em. Gonna meet her at eight tonight."

"Who's Katie?" asked Carl, drowsily amused after his whiskey.

"She's a little brunette I'm goin' with. I'm blonde myself so I like 'em dark an' well-built. Fine-lookin' girl she is. Some curve! She ain't a fast dame by no means but I give her money so's she can look decent. You know the wages they pay at them damn department-stores! I don't wanna be ashamed of her when I take her out so I get her the best of everythin'—silk stockings, nice hat, swell shoes."

"Don't she feel kinda small about a man paying

## BLACKGUARD

for her clothes?" asked Carl, slipping into Petersen's language.

"Well, she said no at first but I told her that she didn't have to give me nothin' except what she wanted to," said Petersen. "I'm a straight guy with women, I am."

"Do you love her?" asked Carl, wondering how Petersen would take the question.

He looked at Carl with a heavy disapproval.

"Say, cut out the kiddin'," he answered. "D'ya lo-o-ove her"—he mimicked the words with astonished derision—"none of that soft stuff for me. She's a good-lookin', wise girl, and if I don't see anyone I like better I'll prob'ly marry her, but she ain't got no ropes tied to me. You bet not! There's plenty of fish in the pond, Jack."

"Yes, if you've got the right kind of bait," answered Carl, deliberately falling into the other man's verbal stride, "but be sure that someone else isn't fishing for you at the same time. Hooked from above, while not watching, you know."

"You're a regular kidder, ain't ya," said Petersen, who dimly felt that Carl was masking the sly wisdom of sexual pursuits and respected him for it. "But say, Katie's got a nice friend—Lucy's her name. She's a little thin, not much curve to



## BLACKGUARD

her, but some men like 'em that way. An' she's kinda quiet too, don't talk much, but I don't care for them when they're always laughin' and cuttin' up. Then they're usually tryin' to get on your good side an' work you for somethin.' Would ya like to meet this dame? I don't know just how far she'll go but she might come across if you work her right."

"Sure, lead me to her," said Carl, inaudibly laughing to himself.

"Alright, I'll make it for eight tuhorrow night. The four of us'll go somewhere . . . Well, one more an' we'll beat it, Jack."

Glancing swiftly ahead, Carl saw that this engagement would demand a certain sum of money and he wondered how he could obtain it since he would not be paid for his present work until the end of the week. While he stood, grasping this little perplexity, he noticed that a man at his left had placed a ten-dollar bill on the bar, in payment for a drink, and that the man was immersed in a violent argument with a friend, with his back turned to the bar. The bartender was at the other end of the counter, and after a glance at Petersen, who stood dully peering into his empty glass, Carl whisked the bill into one of

## BLACKGUARD

his coat pockets. Then he quickly prodded Petersen's shoulder.

"Come on, let's go," he said, and the two walked out of the saloon, Carl taking care to stroll in a reluctant fashion and steeling himself for the angry shout that might come.

As Carl walked down the street he felt a twinge of regret at having stolen the money of a stumbling, minor puppet. He told himself that this petty gesture had been forced upon him by an innately vicious contortion known as life, but his emotions cringed as they arranged an appropriate explanation.

"This man whom I have robbed will curse the treacherous unfairness of life and his eyes, dilated with bitterness, will see more clearly his relation to the things around him. In this way I have really befriended him. The railroad-detective, who once struck me on the head with the butt of a pistol, when I was offering no resistance, was trying to obtain revenge—revenge upon the people who had made him their snarling slave—and he blindly reached out for the object nearest to him, which happened to be my head. But there was no desire for vengeance in my own gesture. I steal from men in order to prevent life from stealing

## BLACKGUARD

an occasional refuge for my thoughts and emotions. A purely practical device."

He left Petersen at the next street-corner and boarded a crowded street-car, reflecting on his engagement to meet the "quiet an' thin Lucy" as he stood wearily clinging to the leather strap. Petersen's attitude toward women was a familiar joke. Dressed in its little array of fixed and confident variations it had pursued Carl in the past without repulsing or flattering him. To him it was an elaborately pitiful delusion of dominance made by hosts of men, who felt the craving to inject a dramatic variety and assurance into the frightened monotones of their lives. In an aching effort to dignify their barren days these men adopted the roles of hunters and masters among women. They entered, with infinite coarseness and precision, a glamorous realm of lies, jealousies, cruelties, and haloes, and in this wildly fantastic land they managed to forget the flatly submissive attitudes of another world. Carl was telling himself that he had been waiting for a woman who could bring him something more than the crudely veiled undulation of flesh but he fashioned the starving little romance with great deliberateness.

## BLACKGUARD

"Women have excited my flesh and it has often yielded to them, but that is simply a necessary triviality," he said to himself. "I, too, must seek to evade the monotonies and restrictions of my life, lest I become mad, but at least I am quite conscious of the joke. The cheap little drug-store does not witness any hoodwinked swaggers on my part! So on to quiet Lucy, with her stiff stupidities and elastic curves."

Once more he had to pass the garrulous sentries at the gate—the neighbors around the doorstep. They eyed the dirt upon his clothes and face with an amazed contempt—Carrie Felman's son a common laborer!—and lost in their scrutiny they gave him monosyllabic greetings.

"Well, judging from the dirt all over you you've found a job," said his mother in tones of blunt resignation.

"Yes, I'm working as a lineman's helper for the telephone company," he answered in an expressionless voice.

After he had washed his parents pelted him with amiable questions—the details of his work, wages, and companions—a dash of solicitude swinging with their desire to entertain the dull aftermath of a hot summer day. He answered

## BLACKGUARD

their questions patiently and they were glad that their son seemed ready to plunge his "wildness" into the soothing currents of an average life. Their affection for him was only able to dominate their hearts when he failed to challenge the peaceful assumptions and bargains of their lives, for otherwise it verged into hatred because it was confronted by a stabbing mystery which it could not understand.

After the evening meal he sat in an easy chair upholstered with violent green plush and usually occupied at such times by his father, but donated to him in honor of his first evening of submission. He sprawled in the chair, trifling with the headlines of a newspaper and throwing them aside. A warm and not unpleasant stupor began to descend upon his thoughts and emotions and they fluttered spasmodically, like circles of drugged butterflies. He closed his eyes. His legs and arms held a heaviness which he enjoyed because he was not forced to raise it.

"Will this be my end—a swinging of arms and legs during the daytime and then different shades of sleep or sensual bravado at night?" he asked himself drowsily—a well-remembered sentence that needed little consciousness.

## BLACKGUARD

Suddenly, an emotional revolt within him tore against his physical lethargy, like lightnings from some unguessed depth of his soul, and he was astonished to find himself sitting upright in the chair. He saluted the victory joyously.

"By God, I won't give in as easily as this," he whispered to the purple grapes on the tan wall-paper, addressing them because their ugliness was at least helplessly inert. "You're concrete symbols, if nothing else, and you don't stumble amidst unconquered clouds. I'll go to the park and try to write a poem."

Agreeably amazed at the returning vestige of strength in his legs he walked to the public-park and sat down upon a bench. Ignoring the people who were strolling or romping around him he bent over his paper-pad and tugged at the smooth insolence of rhyme and meter, but the fight was an uneven one since his mind and emotions were still brittle and dazed from their day of hurried subjection. After crumbling sheets of paper for two hours he wrote:

### TO A SAND-PIPER

One blast—a mildly frightened little host  
Of liquid sprites, each holding one high  
note,

## BLACKGUARD

Aroused from some repentance in the  
throat  
Of this grey-yellow bird who skims the  
coast—  
And silence. Far off I can somehow feel  
The drooping-winged sprites back to  
covert steal.

The poem did not satisfy him, and in a measure he felt like a sleepwalker who was imitating gestures that had lost their meaning to him, but he dared not substitute his actual thoughts and emotions in place of the tenuous or stilted fancies which he believed were all that poetry was allowed to achieve. All that he wanted to say, and all that he did say in conversation with himself, muttered unhappily within him as he sat on the bench and strained to capture the pretty suggestions of a mystical rapture, but he was slave to the belief that poetry was a thinly aristocratic experience in which thoughts and emotions, serene, noble, and ludicrously artificial, disdained the lunges of thought and the turmoils of an actual world—pale, washed-out princes contending among themselves for trinket-devices known as rhymes and meters.

He rose from the bench, impoverished by the effort that he had made to counteract a day of toil, and trudged homeward.

## BLACKGUARD

### CHAPTER VI.

After stumbling through another day of heaving muscles and bruised shins, with his self-hatred gloating over the slavery of his body, he met Petersen and the two girls at a down-town street-corner, grinning at the thought of what this experience might hold, for he liked the idea of pretending to be a sensual beggar while a sneer within him played the part of a bystander.

Petersen's sweetheart, Katie Anderson, was a short, plump girl who tried, with the incessant swiftness of her tongue, to apologize for the excessive slowness of her thoughts. The coarse roundness of her face was determinedly obscured by rouge and powder, and her large brown eyes were continually shifting, as though they feared that stillness might betray some secret which they held. Her face knew a species of sly and mild cunning not unlike that of a rabbit frequently beaten by life but clinging to its mask of courage while hopping through the forest of sensual experience. Her friend, Lucy Melkin, was more subdued and helplessly candid. Her small slender



## BLACKGUARD

body stooped a little as though some unseen hand were pressing too familiarly upon one of her shoulders—a hand of exhausted fear—and the pale oval of her face had the twist of a loosely pleading infant beneath its idiotic red and white. Her blue eyes seemed to be endlessly waiting for something to strike them and wondering why the blow failed to arrive on time.

Petersen suggested that they should visit an adjacent vaudeville theater and when Carl and the others agreed they walked through the crowded streets.

“Baby, but I’ve had some day,” said Katie. “Them shoppers sure get on your nerves, I’m telling you. But you’re not gonna let me work all the time, are you, Charlie dear?”

“There’s no harm in workin’,” said Petersen, not wanting to be quite placed in the position of disdaining an essential fact within his life. “No harm. I gotta take a lot of sass myself from the foreman but it’s all in the day’s game. You don’t get nothin’ easy in this world, ’less you’re a crook, and if y’are you’ll soon wind up in a place where ya don’t wanta be. But still, a good-lookin’ girl like you, Katie, shouldn’t hafta stand on her feet

## BLACKGUARD

all day. Don't be afraid, I'll make it easier for ya pretty soon."

"Now Charle-e, the way you flatter is some-thin' terrible," said Katie, with a simper of nude delight. "I suppose Mister Felman would like to get some nice girl too, wouldn't you, Mister Felman? Or maybe you've got two or three already. You men can never be trusted."

"No, I haven't been lucky," said Carl, secretly exploding with a laughter that was partly directed at himself.

He had been afraid that these girls would prove to be of the shallowly sophisticated, carefully sulky type and he felt relieved at their coarsely direct naivetes. An axe, with baby-blue ribbon tied around it, was more entertaining than a pocket-knife steeped in cheap perfume.

"No, I haven't been lucky," he went on, "but, you know, we're always waiting for the right one."

"Why, that's just what Lucy always says," said Katie, rolling her eyes as she looked at the other girl in a ponderously insinuating manner. "She's always been rowmantic, like you, Mister Felman. Why if I was to tell you of all the fellas she's turned down you wouldn't believe me."

"No, perhaps I wouldn't," answered Carl, keep-

## BLACKGUARD

ing his face sober with a massive effort.

"Now, Katie, you keep quiet," said Lucy, and Carl was surprised at the actual anger that hardened her voice. "I'm perfectly able to talk about my own business without your helpin' an' it's not nice to be sayin' such things to a gen'lman who's just met me. I'm sure he's not interested in my past an' even if he is I'm the one to tell him an' not you. You make me tired!"

"Well, of all things," cried Katie. "I was only tryin' to be nice an' here you go and get real angry about it. I've never had a girl frien' who was as touchy as you are. I didn't really tell Mister Felman anything about you 'cept that you was rowmantic, an' that's nothin' to be ashamed about."

"See here, stop all this quarrelin'," said Petersen, to whom the speech of women was always an ignorance that assailed the patience of masculine wisdom. "You women can talk for ten hours about nothin'! I didn't bring my friend down to have him lissen to your squabblin'. Cut it out, I tell ya."

This storm in an earthen jar was amusing to Carl. He marvelled at the ability of these people to whip words into redundantly nondescript droves

## BLACKGUARD

in which thought gasped weakly as it strove to follow the uproar of simple emotions. Continually, he felt the reactions of a visitor from another planet, witnessing an incredible vaudeville-show. All human beings to him were hollow and secretly despairing falsehoods separated only by the cleverness or crudeness of their verbal disguises, and he heard them with an emotion that was evenly divided between amazement and a chuckle.

"I'm sure that Miss Anderson meant no harm," said Carl, with a whim to become the glib peacemaker. "She was just feeling gay and frisky, and I took her words in the right spirit. Miss Melkin was a little angry because she thought that I didn't understand Miss Anderson's intentions, but she needn't be afraid. I never misinterpret. It was just a little misunderstanding on both sides so let's forget about it."

"Mister Felman, you're such a perfect gen'l-man," said Katie, blithely.

Carl looked at Lucy and saw that a wistfully surprised expression was liking his words and trying to explain them to her mind. It was the look of a baby flirting with an incongruous sophistication and striving to create a fusion between ingenuousness and a certain sensual wisdom learned in the alleys of life.

## BLACKGUARD

"Ah, these starved dwarfs, how little it takes to please them," Carl sighed to himself.

After the wiry, tawdry spectacle of the vaudeville show, with its weary acrobats and falsetto singers, the four visited a grimly gaudy Chinese restaurant, where the Orient becomes an awkward prostitute for Occidental dollars, and while Petersen and Katie gossiped about their friends Carl and Lucy traded hesitant sentences and threw little sensual appeals from the steady gaze of their eyes. Lucy, with her look of a stunned infant, made him feel vaguely troubled—the ghost of a fatherly impulse. After the meal the group separated, since the girls lived in different parts of the city, and as Carl and Lucy rode in the trolley car they tried to make their anticipations more at ease, with the veils of conversation.

"Why do you live?" asked Carl, abruptly, to see whether one or two words in her answer might be different from what he expected.

"What a funny question!" cried Lucy. "I don't know. Maybe it's because I wanta be happy. I never am mosta the time, but then I'm always hopin' that things'll change. Why'd you ask me that funny question?"

The fumbling bewilderment of her words irri-

## BLACKGUARD

tated and saddened Carl, simultaneously, and in an effort to slay the reaction he simulated a compassion.

"Happiness doesn't always speak the truth," he said, struggling to mould his words so that they could reach her understanding. "It's sometimes a beautiful lie. You understand? A beautiful, soft, desperate lie. And we say the lie because we want to change ourselves and somebody else to something that can make us forget our smallness. You see, we are not very large, either in our bodies or in our thoughts, and we try to make ourselves several feet taller, tall enough to put our heads on a level with the trees, tall enough to imagine that the wind respects us. Beautiful, desperate lies. Do you understand?"

"I don't quite understand you," said Lucy. "You speak so different from all the men I know, so different, and yet I like the way you speak. Do you mean it's not good for anyone to be happy?"

"If your happiness doesn't put you to sleep it's good for you. When people try to be happy for more than a little while it makes them sleepy. And, you see, it's much better to be very much alive, or very dead."

"Honest, I'd like to get what you're sayin',"

## BLACKGUARD

said Lucy, perplexed and softly candid. "Maybe you mean that we oughta keep movin' all the time, hearin' and seein' different things, an' maybe you're right about that. I get tired of goin' down to work every mornin' and coming back to the same room every night. I'd like to travel around, an' see different people an' places, an' find out what everything's like. But I guess I never will."

"It's much easier than you imagine," said Carl. "Just pack up your grip some morning and ride away to another city and see what happens there. After you've done it you'll wonder what held you back."

"Oh I just couldn't do that. I'd make my mother so unhappy if I did, an' besides, I'd be afraid of goin' somewhere all alone. I might not find any work in the place where I went, an' then I'd be up against it. I'd like to travel around with plenty of money, an' nothin' to worry me, an'——"

Her words trailed off into a revealing silence, and Carl smiled sadly at the little, pitifully obvious hint within her faltering. Perhaps it might be best to marry this simple, mildly wistful, ignorant girl and surrender himself to monotonous toil and sensual warmth, forgetting the schemes that were torturing his heart and mind. The reaction cap-

## BLACKGUARD

tured him for a time and then died. No, he was gripped by a snarling, nimble blackguard who was determined to lead him to destruction or victory. And in the meantime, here was sensual forgetfulness—an interlude with a girl to whom happiness was merely physical desire captivated by filmy and soothing disguises.

They reached her home, a grey cottage in the suburbs, with a little yard of dusty grass and a modest porch. It bore an aspect of abject simplicity, and that meditative leer possessed by the fronts of all cottages. They sat in a hammock on the porch, and Carl suddenly kissed her with the theatrical intensity of one who is trying to shake off a deliberate role. The gasping expostulations of her voice were contradicted by the limpness of her body, and sighing at this prearranged incongruity, Carl kissed her again, still feeling like a skillful charlatan and still hoping to lure himself into a tumultuous spontaneity. This time she was silent but gripped his shoulders with both hands, while little shades of fright and desire gambled for her face. Suddenly, a meek candor came to her eyes and the seriousness of a child lost in an overwhelming forest moulded her lips.

“Will you be good to me if I let you?” she whispered.



## BLACKGUARD

The pathetic, cringing frankness of her words made a stabbing lunge at his deliberateness and a feeling of troubled tenderness mastered his heart. He wept inaudibly, as though he himself had become a begging child, and the illusion of rare experience, cheated and twisted out of his life, returned to betray him. His head struck her shoulder like the death of regret.

## BLACKGUARD

### CHAPTER VII.

From that night on his life fell into a regular stride—days of wrenching labor and nights of rebellious weariness, broken by intervals in which he crept, like a swindled, dirty child, to the arms of Lucy, washed into a dreamless rest by the simple flow of her desire for him and her sightless worship. To her he was an enigmatic, statuesque prince delighting her with queer words which she could finger as though they were new toys and bringing her an eager compression of grief and joy which she had never known before. She realized, dimly, that he was fundamentally alien to her, and she often said to herself: "Some day he'll meet a child who c'n understand all of his funny words and then he'll forget about me," but this fear only increased the stubbornness of her grasp. And so his life wavered between toil, and sensual peace, and little mildly stunted poems until one morning in late autumn when, at the main office of the telephone company, he was discharged with the information that his job had been merely a temporary one.

## BLACKGUARD

"Thanks, old boy," he said loudly in the face of the astonished cashier. "If you knew what a relief this is to me you'd take a drink with me to celebrate the occasion."

"Now what in the devil's the matter with you?" —the man voiced his peevish perplexity as he fished for Carl's pay envelope.

"I was getting accustomed to the chains, but now that you've benignly removed them I'll make another effort to escape," he answered, in the grip of a gay and aimless relief.

The clerk tapped his forehead, with a scowl, and contemptuously tossed over the envelope. Carl carelessly stuffed the sixteen dollars into a pocket and walked out upon the crowded downtown streets. The streets were touched with the middle of forenoon, that hour when the business section of an American city is most leisurely and nondescript in its make-up. The wagons and trucks were not yet bombarding time with the full climax of their inane roar and the flatly hideous elevated railroad trains were firing at longer intervals. Noise had not yet become the confused and staggering slave of an ill-tempered avarice. The nomads and idlers of the city's populace were flitting in and out among housewives on

## BLACKGUARD

an early shopping-tour and those sleekly bloated men who stroll belatedly to their offices. A sleepy young vaudeville actress, painted and satiated, hurried to some booking-agency; a middle-aged pickpocket emphasized his grey and white checked suit with sturdy limbs and examined passersby, with the face of a shaved fox; an undertaker, tall and old, paced along with that air of worried dignity which his calling affects; a fairly young housewife pounded the sedate roundness of her body over the pavement and held the hand of a small, oppressed boy; a stock-raiser from the west slid his bulky ruddiness along the street, while beneath his broad-brimmed hat his face held an expression of awe-stricken delight; a college-girl, slender and carefully hidden by silk, strove with every mincing twist of her body to remind you that she was pretty; a youth, trimly effeminate and attended by an inexpensive perfume, trotted along, eyeing the scene with an affected air of disapproval.

The streets were cluttered with a ludicrous, artificial union of people — people who were close together and yet essentially unaware of each other's presence, and the invisible, purposeless walls of civilization crossed each other every-

## BLACKGUARD

where. If he swerved two inches to the right the chained trance of this lonely farm-hand might strike the shoulder of this dully wounded chambermaid from the Rialto Hotel, and with this happening their lives might become an inch less burdened and struggling. Their sidelong glances cross for a moment, like tensely held spears, but they pass each other from cautious habit, striding to more prearranged and empty contacts. Civilization has raised wall-making to a fine art, striving to hide its dreamlessness beneath an aspect of complex reticence, and keeping its human atoms feeble and solitary, since pressed together they might break it into ruins. During the rush-hours of a city you can see those streams of people who are busily making and repairing the walls, but during the lulls in the fever upon city streets you may observe the stragglers, wanderers, and grown-up children who are not quite connected with this task and who humbly or viciously hurdle the barriers that separate them.

These thoughts and emotions formed themselves in Carl's mood as he strolled through the clattering, mercenary sounds of a midwestern city. The joy of not being compelled to cope with undesired physical movements brought its light-

## BLACKGUARD

ness to his legs, and he hurriedly fished for secrets from the thousands of faces gliding past him. This shrouded girl with a scowling face—was she meditating upon the possibility of suicide, or wondering why her sweetheart had failed to purchase a more expensive box of candy? Each face curved its flesh over a triviality or an important affair and swiftly taunted his imagination, challenging it to remove the masks that confronted it.

“Life holds a measure of anticipation and mystery because people for the most part pass each other in silence. If they stopped to talk to each other they would become transparent and wearisome.”

As Carl walked along hope began to sing its juvenile ballade within his contorted heart. He planned to send his poems to the magazines and he felt strengthened by the unexpected lull of this late autumn morning. He hurried to his favorite bench in the public square, one that he always occupied if it happened to be vacant when he passed. He had a shyly whimsical fancy—a last remnant of youth asserting itself within him—that his touch upon this bench stayed there while he was absent and gave a sense of invisible, prodding communion to other pilgrim-acrobats who

## BLACKGUARD

occupied this seat at times—an abashed bit of sentimentality evading itself with an image. Filled with the alert meeting of hope and bitterness he wrote with a degree of fluid ease that had never visited him before, and for the first time his lyrics grazed a phrase or two that rumored recalcitrantly of a proud story known as beauty. In one attempted poem he asserted that an old, blind, Greek huckster on the side street of an American city had suddenly towered above the barrenly angular buildings, in a massive reincarnation of Homer, and he wrote in part:

A purplish pallor stole  
Over your antique face—  
The warning of a soul  
Rising with tireless grace.  
Rising above your cart  
Of apples, figs, and plums,  
And with its swelling art  
Deriding the city's drums.

With a quivering immersion he bent over his paper, lost to the keen realities of a city day. Sidling vagrants and transients from small towns glanced at him with morose disfavor and sometimes stopped to stare at this shabby young man whose head was never raised from his writing.

## BLACKGUARD

His abstraction was an insult to their sense of idle release. He wrote for hours and only paused when hunger of a different kind began irresistibly to whisper within him, for he had not eaten since morning. It was six o'clock when he hastened from the park. He joined the homeward bound masses, feeling satiated and apart, and dreading the evening contact with his sagging, verbose parents. They were sitting and standing in two of the few postures that life still absentmindedly allowed them—bending over newspaper and frying-pan.

“Well, I’ve lost my job,” he said to his father.

His father dropped the newspaper and his mother shuffled in from the kitchen.

“Lost your job—what do you mean?” said his mother with slow incredulity, as though she had just escaped being crushed by a falling wall.

“They told me this morning that it had only been a temporary one and they paid me off. I thanked the clerk for his news but he didn’t seem to take it in the right spirit.”

“Ach, I knew it would happen, I knew it,” said Mrs. Felman. “Here’s what you get from your ma-anooal labor! What kind of work is that for an educated boy like you? With your brains, now,



## BLACKGUARD

you could go out on the road and sell goods. You should have more get-up about you. Mrs. Feins-thal was telling me at my whist-club today that her son Harry is making piles of money with Liebman and Company. Sells notions and knick-knacks. You could easy do the same if you had any sense in your head."

"Carrie's right, this slavery is no work for a smart man," said Mr. Felman. "Any fool, you know, can work with his hands, but it takes real intelligence to make a man buy something. I want you to be able to laugh at people, and feel independent, and not be a poor schlemiel all your life."

"Well, you've been a travelling salesman for twenty years," said Carl, with a weary smile, "and before that you tried a general merchandise store, but it doesn't seem to have brought you much money or happiness. You recommend a treacherous wine. The thing that you've fought for has always scarred and eluded you. What's the reason?"

Mr. Felman lowered his head while the round fatness of his face revealed a huddled confusion of emotions in which shame and annoyance predominated. He sat, tormenting his greyish red

## BLACKGUARD

moustache, as though it were a fraudulent badge, and gazing with still eyes at a newspaper which he was not reading.

"Perhaps I've inherited nothing from you save your curious inability at making money," said Carl, trying to feel a ghost of compassion for this petrified, minor soldier lost in the uproar of a battle but still worshipping his glittering general. "You've spent all of your life in chasing a frigid will-o'-the-wisp, made out of the lining of your heart, and you want me to stumble after the same mutilated futility. You're not unintelligent, as far as business ability goes, and yet, you've always been doomed to a kind of respectable poverty. Something else within you must have constantly fought with another delusion to produce such a result. You can't simply blame it on luck—that's an overworked excuse. Perhaps you failed to win your god because you've never been able to teach efficiency and strength to the spirit of cruelty within you. You have not been remorselessly shrewd, my father, and now you are paying the penalty."

"Well, because I've been a fool that's no sign that you should be one, too," answered Mr. Felman in a voice of reluctant and secretly tortured

## BLACKGUARD

self-reproach. "Yes, I've been too kind-hearted for my own good, dammit, but I want that you should be different. It's been too easy for people to swindle me. Yes, I want you to show them something that your poor old father couldn't. Yes. And as for your talk about chasing money, tell me, how can a man live decent without plenty of money? How can he?"

"We would have our nice store this very minute if your father had listened to me," said Mrs. Felman, mournfully. "He never would let me handle the reins. I know how to be firm with people, believe me, but your father would always give credit to every Tom-Dick-and-Harry that walked into the store. And whenever he did have money he always gambled it away. Gambling has been the ruination of his life! All of your wildness, Carl, has come from your father's side and not from mine!"

Mr. Felman looked at his son with an embarrassed admission of secret sins, while for a moment he became a faun lamenting his awkwardness, and his uneasy smile quivered as it tried to say: "Alas, I am not so much better than you are, my crazy, foolish son." Carl grinned in return and for the first time in his life was on the verge

## BLACKGUARD

of feeling a slight communion with his shamefaced father. As the mother went on with her endless story of the father's crimes and incapacities the rubbing of her words produced a glimmer of ill-temper.

"Noo, don't you ever stop?" he cried. "Always nagging about the past! I might be a rich man now if you hadn't driven me crazy with your endless complaints and hollering. Never a moment of peace from the day I married you."

"I'll have to give both of you something else to complain about," said Carl. "I'm going to stop working for a while and write poetry, and send it away to magazines."

"Ach, I thought those writing notions were out of your head," cried Mrs. Felman. "Who will buy your good-for-nothing stuff? I can't understand a word of it myself! Writing again! Will my miseries never end?"

Mr. Felman glared at his son and the old hostility fell opaquely between them.

"Between you and your mother I'll be in the grave soon!" he shouted. "I'm done with you!"

He arose and stalked out of the apartment, muttering and producing a loud period of sound as he closed the door.

## BLACKGUARD

Al Levy strolled into the dining room, triumphantly tinkering with one of the points of his small black moustache; lightly whistling a tune from some latest musical comedy; and bearing upon his face the look of bored patience which he assumed when in the presence of an inferior being. After he and Carl had exchanged constrained "helloes" he sat at the table and nervously interested himself in his cigar, as though silently signaling for future words.

"See here, Carl, I don't want to butt in, and of course, it's none of my business, but I couldn't help hearing some of the argument that you've just had with your parents and I want to give you a little advice, purely for your own good. You're on the wrong track, old boy. You're living in a world that wasn't made to order for you and you can't change it. If you don't bow to the world the old steam-roller will get you, and what satisfaction is that going to bring you? This poetry of yours is all very well as a side-line, something to fill in the time when you're not working, and of course it's very pretty stuff. I like to read poetry myself sometimes. But really you shouldn't take it more seriously than that. I'm telling you all this

## BLACKGUARD

because you've really got a fairly good head on you and I hate to see you go wrong."

The sleekly loquacious man in front of him, offering his shop-worn little adulterations of worldly wisdom, aroused Carl to a lightly vicious mood.

"You've wandered away from your natural field, Levy," he said. "Talk about the cheap jewelry that you sell, or the physical merits of a woman, or the next candidate for mayor, or the latest prize-fight, but don't speak about something that's simply an irritating mystery to you. You know as much about poetry as I do about credits and discounts, but you're a swaggering, muddy fool who imagines that the wisdom of the world has kissed his head. I'm not interested in you or your words—you're simply five crude senses dressed in a blue serge suit and trying to scoop in as much drooling pleasure as they can before they decay. Go out to your poolroom or down-town theater and leave me in peace!"

Levy gasped blankly for a moment and then frowned with an enormous hatred.

"Why, you stupid fool, this is the thanks I get for giving you a little sensible advice!" he cried. "You think that you're better than everyone else

## BLACK GUARD

with all the rot you write about roses and love, but let me tell you something, a common bricklayer is more important than you are, any day in the year! A man like that is helping the progress of the world while you're nothing but a puffed-up little idler! And even you have got to do manual labor because you're not fit for anything else. You're just a bag of easy words. If it wasn't for your parents I'd punch you in the face and teach you a lesson!"

Mrs. Felman, who had been knitting on the rear porch, rushed into the room.

"Boys, boys, stop it!" she cried, in anguish. "Are you out of your minds—fighting in the house! Don't pay any attention to what Carl says, Al. You know he's crazy and not responsible."

"Well, after all, you're right, I shouldn't pay any attention to him," said Levy with a sulky loftiness. "I only spoke to him for your sake, you know, but I'll leave him alone after this."

Carl grimaced with the aid of his eyebrows and suppressed the easy words with which he could have clubbed the man in front of him. After Levy departed Carl fled to the street to escape his mother's enraged words concerning the possible loss of a valuable roomer.

## BLACKGUARD

### CHAPTER VIII.

During the next two weeks Carl sat in his drably dark room, slowly copying his poems with a stiff, perfect handwriting and mailing them to magazines and newspapers, but rejection-slips, fresh from the printer, began to reach him with each return mail. Many of his uncertain, mystical poems were equal to the quality of verse maintained by certain American publications, but editors scarcely ever trouble themselves to read verse that is copied in pen and ink and bears the spirals of deceptively boyish handwriting. Under the blow of each returned poem Carl receded inch by inch to his old cell of faltering insignificance. He went back to the tame routines of physical labor, finding work as a plumber's assistant, and still consoled himself by creeping, like a soiled and weeping child, to Lucy's blind and half-motherly worship.

One evening, after he had stepped into the brightly dismal sitting-room of Lucy's home, he noticed an uneasy politeness in the greeting of her parents—the usual well-smeared cordiality



## BLACKGUARD

was absent. At first he felt that he might have made a mistake, but one glance at the nervous distress upon Lucy's transparent little face indicated that some change had taken place in her family's regard for him. Lucy was never successful in her efforts at evasion, and each one of the pitifully comical masks that she wore merely snugly revealed the outline of the emotion which they were attempting to conceal. With a strained gaiety she suggested a walk and after they had reached the street he questioned her.

"Well, what's the trouble, Luce? The graceful, January note in your parent's voices was not quite expected. Tell me what it's all about."

"Oh, it's nothing, nothing, Carl dear."

"I'm quite sure that it's nothing in reality, since your parents are almost incapable of thought, but at any rate, you might explain the empty gesture to me."

"Carl, you're talking so funny again. I adore you when you say things that I can't understand. But, oh Carl, I've forgotten, I mustn't say that to you any more. I mustn't. You don't know what's happened."

"No, I don't. What is it?"

"Why, my father says that he's convinced by

## BLACKGUARD

now that your intentions to me aren't serious an' he says that he doesn't want me to go with you any more. He says that you're only triflin' with my affections else you'd have asked me to marry you long ago, an' my mother says I shouldn't go with you 'cause you don't seem to have any ambition to rise in the world an' 'cause you haven't enough money to support a wife. . . . Gee, if you knew the jawin' they've been givin' me for the last two nights!"

"Yes, but why has all this come so suddenly?" asked Carl.

"I don't want to tell you, Carl."

"You might as well, Luce. I can see part of it on your face now, because you always talk best when you're silent. Tell me."

"Well, you know my second cousin Fred has always been runnin' after me, only I've always been cool to him because I don't love him, of course, but a couple of nights ago he came to my father an' said that he wanted to marry me an' that I wouldn't have him. An' ever since then they've all been on top of me! He's got a store on the north side, a gents' furnishing store, an' he makes piles of money, an' all my family are just crazy for me to marry him. They say I'm just

## BLACKGUARD

wastin' my time with you an' they've forbidden me to see you after tonight."

Carl felt the incongruous embrace of amusement and compassion as he listened to her simple, broken, troubled words. This thinly yearning, stifled girl who had folded him in the arms of her puzzled adoration, was life really on the verge of wounding the diminutive misty mendicant that was her heart? He felt helpless, and a little guilty because he was not as troubled as he should have been.

"Do you want to give me up?" he asked.

"Carl, you know I don't! You know it. But, Carl, you wouldn't ever marry me, would you?"

"No, I'm not the kind of a person that you ought to marry, Luce."

She was silent for a time and he watched her with a pitying question. Had he been unfair to this poignantly cringing child? Yes, but unfairness was inevitable when people from those different planets contained within an earth yield to a surface emotional attraction.

"Carl, I've always known that we'd hafta part sometime," she said, "only I tried to make believe that I didn't know it. But I did. We're too different from each other, Carl, an' you know so much

## BLACKGUARD

more than I do an' you're so much better than I am. I wanted to hold on to you 'cause I wanted to make you happy, but all the time I knew that we wasn't meant for each other. O I knew it so well!"

"I'm not in any way better than you are," said Carl. "It's just that we each want different things from the world. You want to settle down in a home, and polish your kettles, and sing to your children, and blithely wait for your tired husband every night, while I want to write foolish words on slips of paper and escape from the world around me."

"But, Carl, it'll be so hard for me to leave you," she said, in the mournful, dazed voice of one who turns away from a stone wall of whose existence he is not quite certain.

A tumult of frail inquiries found the corners of her face and lips. Her breasts heaving beneath the blue muslin waist suggested the movements of loosely despairing hands. She sat with Carl on the grass of a park and wept in a barely audible manner as though she were intent upon giving firmer outlines to a blurred and elusive grief. Carl felt a softly potent disgust with himself and life. Human beings—what did they ever bring each other except pain cunningly disguised or

## BLACKGUARD

reaching for a phantom ecstasy? Now he would be alone again; the slender thread binding him to animated life would snap; while this child, who held a cloud where a brain should have resided, would hide her glimpse of a grotesquely forbidden heaven and plod back to the soothing subterfuges of her world. Flitting lies seducing a black void into an attitude of false friendship. A stumbling urge, mistaking its own drops of perspiring ardor for permanent, actual jewels.

As they stood upon the porch of her home she looked at the darkened windows and then clutched the lapels of his coat.

"They're all in bed now," she whispered. "Carl, I've got to have you once more before you go. I've got to. Maybe I'm a bad girl, maybe, I don't know, but I want to hold you again."

"This will be the least thing that I can give you," said Carl inaudibly as they sat upon the hammock. With great care he tried to form within himself the intensity of a despairing father, drawing the swift incense of motion into a farewell to his child, in the hope that she might be idiotic enough to preserve it afterwards as a tangible comfort.

He closed his eyes as he kissed her, a little afraid to look into her face.

## BLACKGUARD

### CHAPTER IX.

One Sunday morning, Carl sat at home, lightly wandering through a newspaper. On the previous night he had met Petersen and had yielded to an invitation to accompany "two swell brunettes who don't object to a gay time," and the recollection of his violent, drunken contortions came to him like a wierdly teasing dream of no particular significance but leaving the temptation of nausea behind it. He had released a desecrating ghost of himself from the sneering recesses of his self-despair. Yes, you could burn away the sensual rubbish, with derisive gestures, but your emptiness and weariness always returned for their slow revenge. He sought to put his thoughts to sleep with the hasty versions of loves, catastrophes, and law-suits that winked maliciously at him from the newspaper.

In the middle of one page he came upon a rectangle of gossip concerning a poetry magazine of whose existence he had never known, and darting from his insensitive trance he lingered greedily over the news. Through the efforts of

## BLACKGUARD

an elderly poetess several society people had agreed to endow a small magazine that would be entirely devoted to verse, and the newspaper item was heralding the fact that one of these people had contributed a sonnet to a recent issue of the magazine. "Mr. Robert Endicott, the well-known clubman and member of fashionable sets, appears with a delicate contribution in this month's issue of *The Poetry Review*, our aristocratic little magazine of the muse. This will be a surprise to those who know Mr. Endicott only in his role of business-man and society leader." Carl strove to be properly impressed by the surprise, decorating it with the Order of the Nasty Chuckle.

He felt that it might be consoling to receive a rejection slip from an upper-world magazine of this kind—a dab of caviar on the empty plate—and so he sent them three poems. The paper oblong came, but its blank side held the following note: "Dear Mr. Felman: Your work interests me. Won't you drop into the office some time? Clara Messenger."

What men call triumph is a fanciful exaltation that may fall alike upon atoms and temples—a grandiose child of hope, whose mother is egoism and whose father is pain. Men, whose life is but

## BLACKGUARD

a sensitive or oblivious second—a fleeting stampede within mist—seek the absurd consolation of believing that their work will become immortal, and this phantom lie has induced many a soldier to writhe upon some trivial battlefield and many a minor poet to fight with threats of the gutter. Carl Felman, obscure, gasping struggler, communing with the marks left by endless whips, felt foolishly thrilled at this first glimpse of personal attention from a magazine and became like a swain to whom a glove has been thrown from an enticingly high balcony. He stood peering up with a timid excitement.

On the following afternoon he managed to leave the plumbing shop, with a plea of illness, and raced to the office of the magazine. A feathery swirl of quickly purchased emotions—fragments of a youth that had been shattered—revolved within his heart. As he closed the door of the large office he saw two women seated at different desks and poised over the rustle of papers. One was elderly and sedate, and her sober clothes were reprimanding a substantial body. Beneath a survival of greyish-brown hair, plainly gathered, the narrow oval of her face looked at life with a politely questioning air. It was the mellowly



## BLACKGUARD

distorted expression of one who has arrived at final convictions regarding the major parts of life, and is patiently and inflexibly regarding the lesser perceptions surrounding her. Her slightly wrinkled face was dominated by a long, thin nose and thin, tightly expectant lips, and it seemed that her tired emotions had gone to sleep and were staring out from a dream of suave wakefulness. The other woman was hovering near the last climax of her youth, and her slender body rose unobtrusively to the pale repressions of her face. Small and round, her face carried a well-trimmed self-satisfaction—the reward of one whose dreams have lived inwardly, with only an occasional sip of forbidden cordials. Her loosely parted lips guarded a receding chin and her barely curved nose ascended to large brown eyes and a high forehead.

Carl walked to her desk and stood for a moment like a child in a cumbersome robe who is waiting for some inevitable rebuke. The harshly weary assurance which he was able to display to other people vanished in this imagined shrine of an unattained art. The young woman looked up with courteous blankness.

“My name is Carl Felman. You wrote me a note

## BLACKGUARD

last week," said Carl, delicately groping for the inconsequential words.

"Oh, yes, I remember"—her face attained a careful smile, tempered by a modest curiosity. "I'm so glad that you came down."

She turned to the other woman.

"Mary, this is Mr. Felman, the gentleman that I spoke to you about. He sent us a rather interesting group of poems, you know."

Carl winced at the word "rather"—it was associated to him with "more or less," "somewhat," "somehow," and "to some extent," those words and phrases with which cultured people manage to say nothing and yet preserve the faint appearance of saying something. His breathless attention disappeared and was replaced by the old morose aloofness. If this woman had asserted that his poems were trivial or stifled, he would have respected her, but now he spat contemptuously at the smooth veil of her words.

Mary Aldridge, editor of *The Poetry Review*, moved her lips into an attitude that came within a hair's breadth of being a smile—an expression of slightly amused and restrained condescension. She lifted a pencil as though it were an age-old scepter held by practiced fingers.

## BLACKGUARD

"How do you do, Mr. Felman," she said.

Some people are able to say "how do you do" in a way that makes it sound like "why are you here?" and Carl inwardly complimented her on this minor ability and said his repetition in a voice that made it mean "slip down, fathead." After this exchange of vocal inflections, part of the general vacuity with which human beings greet each other for the first or last time, he seated himself and clutched a roll of manuscripts in the manner of a father who is frantically shielding his child from some invisible danger.

"I sent you some poems which were returned, but I have some others here," he said. "Perhaps you will do me the favor of reading them. I am, of course, anxious to know what may be wrong with my work, and also what faint virtues it may hold. Sometimes I feel sure that I am not a poet and I allow myself the luxury of becoming angry at the persistent longing that makes me run after futilities. Will you read some of these poems and tell me whether I am a fool, or a faltering pilgrim, or anything definite?"

The abashed and yet softly incisive candor would have unloosened or entertained the emotions of anyone except Mary Aldridge. She

## BLACKGUARD

regarded him with a coldly amused impatience.

"We-ell, I'm very busy just now," she said, "but I'll glance through some of your things. As I recall, your work had a rather promising line here and there."

He handed her his roll and she scanned the poems, thrusting each one aside with a quick frown. She lingered a bit over the last one, in which he had extracted a sleeping Homer from the soiled and cowering figure of a blind Greek peddler.

"M-m, this one isn't so bad," she said, "though I think that the last lines are a little forced."

"If I decide to alter them, will you take the poem?" asked Carl, bluntly.

"Oh, no, no, Mr. Felman; your work is by no means good enough for publication," she answered. "I merely meant that this poem in particular had an element of interest."

Accustomed to blows of all kinds, Carl felt relieved that her frigid shroud had been finally lifted, and with a smile he reached for his cap. Conversation is merely a tenuous or sturdy protection given to an instinctive like or dislike, and with their first words people unconsciously reveal the attitude toward each other which they

## BLACKGUARD

will afterward try to excuse and defend with great deliberation. Carl hated the woman in front of him, not because she had slighted his work, but because she held to him an attenuated and brightly burnished hypocrisy that was like a shriveled mask incessantly polished by her words. He could have imagined her stamping upon a hyacinth as though she were conferring a careful favor upon the petals and calyx. Mary Aldridge, on her part, disliked the straight lines of intent which she could sense beneath his terse questions and missed the bland insincerities of those smoothly adjusted postures known as good manners. Life to her was a series of stiffly draped and modulated curves, violated only by rare moments of guarded exasperation and anger.

"Would you advise me to stop writing?" asked Carl.

"No, indeed," she answered, with her first small smile. "Your work is rather promising and you seem to be quite young. Some of it reminds me of Arthur Symons. Of course, I don't think that you will ever become a great poet, but we need lesser voices as well as greater ones, you know."

"Would you mind if I asked you to stop using that word *ra-ather* and try a little spontaneous directness?" asked Carl, blithely.

## BLACKGUARD

She rose suddenly and addressed the other woman, ignoring his words as though they had been a trivial insult.

"I've just remembered that I must meet Mr. Seeman at three," she said. "I'm afraid that I shall have to leave you with this impulsive gentleman."

Carl stood up, but the other woman revealed with an unrestrained smile that she was actually aware of his presence.

"Won't you stay awhile?" she asked. "We can talk a bit over your work, if you care."

Carl looked at her with suspicion and interest—a trace of gracious attention in this place. He resolved to explore the seeming phenomenon and settled back in his chair, while Mary Aldridge, with a barely audible farewell, walked out of the office.

"Don't you think you were a little crudely sarcastic in your last remark to Miss Aldridge?" asked Clara Messenger.

"I like an axe sometimes," said Carl, "although I don't worship it monotonously. For certain purposes it works far better than the swifter exuberance of a stiletto. Unless a person is unassumingly frank to me I don't feel that he has earned a delicate retort."

## BLACKGUARD

"Why, it's impossible to live in the world with a code like that. One would have to become a hermit."

"No, even hermits are never absolutely isolated. Living on another planet would be the only remedy, I guess."

"What a curious, lunging person you are! But you shouldn't have minded Miss Aldridge so much. She's always afraid that if she openly encourages a young poet he'll imagine that he's a genius."

"That's a harmless trick of imagination and it doesn't need any encouragement or censure. It's a shade better, perhaps, than imagining that you are a fool."

"What an old-young person you are. When you talk I feel that I'm listening to an insolent essay. I'm not so sure that a poet doesn't need praise. It's part of his task to change the polite praise around him to an understanding appreciation, and that can be very necessary and exciting."

"To a poet the appreciation of other people must be like a glass of lukewarm wine taken after work," said Carl.

"Well, I know that it means a great deal to me," said Clara Messenger. "It reassures me that I'm speaking to the hearts and minds of the

## BLACKGUARD

people around me and I'd feel very unimportant if at least a few people didn't like my work. One can't live in a vacuum, after all."

"No? I've done it for five years or so. I think that all of us secretly live in vacuums, but we use our imaginations to conceal that fact. Words were really invented to hide this essential emptiness."

"You're a massive pessimist! The strangest man of twenty-three that I've ever seen! If things are so utterly hollow to you, why do you live?"

"In order to persuade myself that I have a reason for living—a defiant entertainment in the presence of an empty theater. . But it's always futile to defend your reason for living. Tell me, instead, what do you think of your associate, Miss Aldridge?"

"I really think that she treated you a little heartlessly, but at the same time I don't think that she meant to," said Clara. "Mary is a woman who grew into the habit of hiding herself from people because so many of those who looked at her youth, at one time, failed to understand it."

"I can understand that process, though I don't believe that it applies in her case. It's a slow



## BLACKGUARD

and sullen withdrawing from the jibing strangers around you—a wounded desire to meet their walls of misunderstanding with even harder walls of your own. As you grow older, I suppose, the sullenness may change to a well-mannered and hopeless aloofness. Age softens the attitude and, still self-immersed, it seeks the distraction of words.”

“What has happened to make you say this?” asked Clara, with a mistily maternal impulse.

“Just now I’m working in a plumber’s shop, helping the sewers with their sluggish germs of future turbulence,” said Carl, “and that, of course, can play its part in the making of a pessimist. . But tell me what you think of my work?”

“Plumbing or poetry?”

“Both of them are interwoven.”

“Your poems are stiff and dimly tinted, like a row of plaster-of-paris dolls standing on a dusty and venerated shelf. Don’t you see? You talk about twenty times better than you write, and I can’t understand this peculiar incongruity. Perhaps you’ve been taught that poetry is something that must be ethereal and noble at all costs, and perhaps you’ve been inarticulate because the rest of you has been at war with this one illusion.

## BLACKGUARD

I don't feel that you've looked upon poetry as a place where you could express your actual thoughts and feelings."

When a man has been intangibly blind for a long time, he usually stumbles at last, accidentally, upon an incident or challenge that makes him totter on the edge of vision, and in that moment it is revealed whether this blindness has been innate or not. If he wavers, then his lack of sight has been an artificial ailment, and if his first reaction after the stumble is one of stubborn irritation his tightly-shut eyes are not apt to open. Carl felt, without quite being able to shape the picture, that he was walking out of a sublime bric-a-brac shop, and yet the contact of him, left behind in the shop, continued to speak with his words. As he discussed poetry with Clara he began slowly to feel that he had been a minute and prisoned fool, although his words writhed in an effort to escape an absolute admission. She gave him practical scoldings, also, concerning the exact way in which manuscripts should be submitted to editors, and he listened with the amusement that a man feels when he suddenly sees that he has been walking along a street with his shoes unlaced. She gave him, again and again,

## BLACKGUARD

her hazily maternal smile in which sensual desires selfishly clothed themselves in an ancient and soothing dress known as kindness.

"I do hope that I've helped you," she said. "I'd like to feel that I've aided someone to discover his real self."

When he returned to his room he applied a match to everything that he had ever written and watched the flaming pile of papers with an emotion in which dread, tenderness, and elation were oddly contending against each other. These bits of paper, with their symbols of shimmering confusion, had been decorated by the sweat of his body, the brittle despair of his heart, and the anger of his soul, and their death brought him a helpless and jumbled sadness; but gradually another reaction began to possess him. The naked quivers of a fighter, crouched in the plan of his first blow, centered around his heart, and all of the thoughts within his mind gave one shout in unison—a meaningless hurrah just before the first leap of a creative battle. During the next two months he wrote with an insane speed, and all of his thoughts and emotions rushed out in an irresistible, nondescript mob scene—a French Revolution swinging its torches and howls against

## BLACKGUARD

every repression and constraint within him. Good, bad, and mediocre, they rain in the circles of a celebrated revenge, and his main purpose was expressed in these first four lines of one of his poems:

You have escaped the comedy  
Of swift, pretentious praise and blame,  
And smashed a tavern where they sell  
The harlot's wine that men call fame.

PART II

THE KNIFE



# The Knife

## CHAPTER X.



WITH Clara Messenger as his guide, Carl began to discover that another world nestled between the dull apartment houses, raucous markets, and underworld saloons which had confined his body—a world of smoother parlors and studios, in which stood “poets,” painters, sculptors, novelists, critics, Little Theater actors, art patrons, students of the arts, all leading their little squads of camp followers or plodding methodically in the ranks. This world was swaggering and overheated, and within it hosts of minor people were raising their faltering or blissfully insincere prayers to a god with a thousand faces, whom they called Artistic Expression—a god of astigmatic egoism dressed in cautious shades of emotion and thought, and obsessed with a fear of irony and originality.

Carl felt like an emancipated hermit suddenly

## BLACKGUARD

thrown as a sacrifice to an uproar of contending philosophies and artistic creeds. His mind, accustomed to solitary decisions, became bewildered amidst the bloodless, fin-sword battle around him and he wondered how he could possibly make his own voice heard in the egoistic din. Each man assured him that the other man was a fool or a charlatan, and he listened to their conflicting assumptions of wisdom with a naive dismay.

"What has lured these people into their attitudes of isolated and weary superiority?" he asked himself, "and if the attitudes are genuine, why do these people make a garrulous religion of attacking each other? If they actually believed that their convictions were mountain ranges, with some snow of immortality soft beneath their feet, they would dwell with a more pensive calmness upon these substantial protests, instead of assiduously pelting each other with flecks of mud in the valleys."

With the melancholy idealism of his youth Carl had made an emotional sketch in which artists and writers were a band of profoundly misunderstood martyrs, clinging to each other as they accepted the indifference and ridicule of a practical world, and he was amazed to find that



## BLACKGUARD

almost all of them were far too easy to understand, and thronged with shudders of words at the idea of clinging to one another. Like an array of famished and animated housewives, they traded gaiety and friendly argument while in each other's presence, while in secret they carved each other with gossiping exaggerations, three-penny sneers, and every hair's-breadth edge of derision. Even among their different "schools" and cliques he found little fusion—the members of each group were plotting to unseat their leader because they had commenced to fear that he was merely using them as a step-ladder.

This trivial drama, with malice performing menial duties in the service of the old, egoistic dream of immortal expression and emotional tallness, was a new reality to Carl and he surveyed it with an alert contempt.

"Why all of this clownish, papier-mache melodrama, with words playing the part of overworked murderers?" he asked himself. "Is it possible that faint voices whisper within these people that they are not as important and all-seeing as they would like to be? Most ludicrous tragedy! The noise, alas, must ever continue, since their doubts and fears require a constant pounding. Poor,

## BLACKGUARD

astounding people! . . . The critic, stroking his suave patter above a tea-table: 'Oh, yes, Mr. X. is a very sound man, very sound.' 'Mr. C. is indeed a great poet, for there's a certain simplicity and sincerity in everything he does.' 'Mr. E. is amazingly clever and erudite—a most important man.' 'Mr. B.? I'm afraid that he's only a minor Baudelaire, you know, the old morbid straining after originality'—this critic is merely allowing his thoughts and emotions to perform their private functions upon the publicity of a fanciful pedestal, to retch, relieve themselves of fluids and rubbishes, and scratch their smarts. It is, in truth, a weird, prolonged indecency."

He meditated upon his own relation to this explanation of the belligerent waste of energy around him.

"I am a better egoist than the people around me," he said. "I will not be forced to display my private organs as often as they. Only an absolute egoist can afford to be calm and more obscurely naked. If I indulge, at rare intervals, a secret grin will gain its reward."

His thoughts had mounted these conclusions as he sat one night in Clara's studio, with his legs tucked in above a scarlet cushion. She looked

## BLACKGUARD

at him with a petulant question on her face.

"Carl, why are you forever arousing the enmity of people?" she asked.

"Because I detest most of them; because I like straight lines and angles in conduct while they prefer curves and circles; and for a variety of reasons."

"But, Carl, you don't need to be so deliberate about antagonizing people."

"I'm not. I'm simply myself most of the time—a difficult task, but it can be achieved."

"Well, everybody is sneering at your latest stunt. Why, oh why, did you have to parade down Scott street smoking that long Chinese pipe of yours, with a red ribbon tied to the stem? Carl, sometimes I almost believe that you love to pose!"

"I ain't guilty, I swear it. When that group of my poems came out in the big eastern magazine I simply felt that the event demanded an unashamed celebration. It was like the christening of a healthy child and I wanted something stronger than whiskey or wine. An odd longing that comes to me sometimes. I decided to commit the inexplicable crime of becoming immersed in a new toy of motion. I fitted a rubber mouth-piece over the tip of the pipe and used it half of

## BLACKGUARD

the time as a cane. I've been told that a crowd followed me but I didn't turn my head to investigate."

"Well, everyone has heard about it and they're all calling you a cheap little poseur. And, really, I don't know that they're wrong. I never felt so angry in my life. You love to attract the attention of other people and you'll make every kind of excuse rather than admit this fact!"

He showed an outburst of surface anger.

"You can act more impulsively in a camp of lumber-jacks than before a crowd of so-called artists and writers," he said. "The lumber-jacks might regard you with a simple amazement, or an unrestrained laughter, but at least they'd grant you the sincerity of insanity! Since I must choose between stupid people I prefer the more roughly natural ones."

"I'm tired of hearing you call everybody a hypocrite," said Clara. "It's just a nice way that you have of defending your own actions!"

He arose and reached for his cap.

"I'll leave you to this weariness," he said angrily. "It may be possible that, as I walk down the street, no one will believe that I'm striding along in a highly deliberate manner. The thought is pleasant."

## BLACKGUARD

"Carl, don't be foolish," she said, half-repentantly, but without answering he walked out of the studio.

This had not been his first quarrel with Clara, and the frequency of their collisions, always followed by a skirmish of nervous laughter, made him believe that they were both stupidly postponing a sure separation. Clara was, in her entire essence, a deft Puritan industriously beating the back of a frightened Pagan. At certain intervals the Pagan arose and knocked the Puritan unconscious but the latter always gradually revived and resumed its dulcet mastership, and Clara liked or disliked Carl whenever her inner situation shifted in these ways. Carl had grown weary of being alternately punched and caressed by her moods. He had long since realized that his relations with her were merely the playthings of a fluctuating emotional response and that neither he nor she had the slightest respect for each other's habits and minds, and on this evening, as he walked down the street after leaving her studio he knew that the uncertain pretence of drama had ended.

He had slowly discovered that almost all of the people around him, with their different versions of culture and art—those two realities hidden by

## BLACKGUARD

mincing courtezans of egoism—were distrustful of bluntness and gay impulse in conduct and had made a word known as “unconventional,” in order to defend the ordinary fright that governed their actions. A venerable contradiction among these minor people but one that had held new outlines for him. He had also learned that most of these people were so accustomed to masquerades that they could not believe in the reality of a carelessly naked attitude and usually mistook it for a dazzling and ingenious pose.

## BLACKGUARD

### CHAPTER XI.

Filled with these gloomy realities he walked down a roughly bright street where the underworld tiptoed furtively between the ranks of semi-respectable working-people—a street of gaping, sleekly sinister saloons, cabarets, small, thickly tawdry shops, and cheap, coffin-like hotels and apartment houses. The hour was early—nine p. m.—and he walked slowly, engaged in his favorite pastime of watching the shrouded haste of crowds. As he passed a moving-picture theater, dotted with greasy electric lights and plastered with inanely gaudy posters, he felt a light hand on his shoulder. He turned and saw Lucy standing before him. The sight gave him a friendly shock, for on this evening he was tired of clever hypocrisies and longed for anything that would be crude and unassuming.

“Lucy, have you fallen down from some sky?” he asked.

“No, I just came out of the theater here an’ saw you walkin’ by. Gee, but I’m glad I did! It’s been a year now since we’ve seen each other,

## BLACKGUARD

hasn't it? An' I never, never thought I'd meet you again."

"Well, what has happened to you, Luce?" he asked as they walked down the street together.

"I'm married to Fred now. I didn't see anything else to do after you left, and all of my folks just pushed me into it. 'Nen besides I was tired of workin' in that darn store. Tired."

"Are you less tired now? Happy?"

"Mm, Fred's an awful nice man in his way an' I s'pose I oughta be happy. He really loves me, Fred does, an' he don't seem to lose his temper the way some men do. , 'Course, he's a little stingy with money but then I s'pose he's tryin' to look out for the future."

"Do you love him now, Luce?"

Her head drooped a little and she was silent for a time.

"I guess it's terrible of me not to love him, after all he's done for me, but I just don't. I always keep rememberin' all of your funny ways an' all the time we was together an' I feel ashamed of it too 'cause it's kinda like not bein' true to Fred, but I can't help it. There's been times when I've managed to forget about you but they don't last long enough."



## BLACKGUARD

He tried to make himself feel like a helpless knave as he listened to this simple child of earth who longed for the palely inexplicable god before whom she had once grovelled in rhythmic speechlessness. He had taken all of her eager silences, pardoned by the damp understanding of flesh, and bestowed upon her in return nothing save the blurred vision of thoughts and emotions which it would have been useless for her to understand, and the tantalizing fantasy of his embraces. If he had stayed with her he would have mutilated, kicked, and evaded every longing and purpose of his life while she would have revelled in happiness. Walking down this street were thousands of people, trying to embalm a softly sensual hour with the fluids and devices of bravely stupid lies, and inventing words—"honor," "respectability"—to conceal the grotesquely snickering effect of their lives. Life was, indeed, an insipid mountebank!

"Luce, I ought to feel like a selfish dog, for if I did, then at least I could give you a belated shoulder to cry upon," he said. "We're different persons, that doesn't need to be said, but still I'm sorry at times that we parted. I need your stupidity."

"Do you still care for me, Carl?"

## BLACKGUARD

"There are times when I want you again. You brought me a delicate dumbness which I could change into any kind of speech, with my fingers and words. Your simplicity doesn't swagger, or point admiringly to itself, and I like that. Just now I am surrounded by people who are not different from you except that they have memorized three or four thousand words more, and use them with a moderate degree of cunning. Your silences are much better."

"I'm not always silent 'cause I don't understand what you say. Sometimes I do understand, but I keep quiet 'cause I don't know how to tell you about it."

They turned down a side-street and he looked questioningly at her.

"Aren't you afraid that Fred may see us together?" he asked.

"I forgot to tell you. He left this afternoon for Pittsburg, to see his mother, an' he'll be gone for two weeks. I'm all alone now."

That conversing silence, in which a suggestion is so strongly felt that it need not be heard, was released from both of them and remained until they reached the apartment building in which she lived, and stood in the dark hallway.

## BLACKGUARD

"I don't want to leave you now"—her whisper was frightened but stubbornly tender. "I don't want to. For all I know I may never see you again and if I don't I've got to have somethin' that I can hold on to. Somethin' that's not as foolish as just talkin' words. . . I'm a dreadful girl, I s'pose. I must be very wicked. I must be. . . But I don't care. Please don't go away."

They stood in the hallway like two dizzy, burdened children feeling the advancing shadow of an irresistible action and yet waiting for the exact moment when all deliberate words would vanish. Until their minds were quite free of words their limbs could not move. Suddenly they both mounted the stairway, hand in hand, as though a kindly demon had decided to make playthings of their legs.

When Carl left the apartment building early on the following morning and hurried to the suburban cigar-store where he now worked half of the day as a clerk, his old self-disgust was absent and a cleanly wild lightness took his limbs, as if he had slept upon the plain sturdiness of a hillside and was pacing away with the borrowed vigor.

"The only time that I dislike earth is when it is dressed in urgent mud, adulterated perfumes,

## BLACKGUARD

strained lies, and repentant fears," he told himself as he walked through the bustling shallowness of each city street.

Before leaving Lucy he had promised to return on the following night, and when she had wept and begged him "not to think that she was a terribly bad girl," he had laughed softly and dropped his lips upon her tears.

"You have been yourself, Luce, and since the world is always conspiring against such an arbitrary occurrence, you can give yourself a bewildered congratulation," he told her, gayly.

Without understanding his words she had felt the presence of defiant sounds which had cheered her. During the next two weeks, as he remained with her each night, he reflected upon the possible melodrama that lurked just outside of his visits.

"If her husband suddenly returns and finds me with her he'll want to kill me," he said to himself once, as though he welcomed the idea. "He'll feel that only my death could heal his injured vanity—vermilion medicine!—but, of course, instead of admitting that to himself he'll find an accommodating phrase to hide the actual motive, such as 'avenging his honor,' 'killing a treacherous hound,' 'defending the family,' etc. The news-

papers are full of such charming episodes, well fortified by words, for without words to obliterate his motives man would perish in a day. Melodrama is the only real sincerity that life holds—the one surprising directness in a world of false and prearranged contortions. Perhaps I could ravish my fears and welcome it. I don't know, and no one can until it actually arrives."

But the two weeks died without the blundering interruption of drama, and Lucy and Carl parted on the last morning with a chuckling stoicism—tears and the syllables of laughter are always similar—the madcap protest of a last kiss—lips and tongues intent upon a future compensation—and a final flitting of hands. They had slapped in the face a violent shadow known as life and now it would take a fancifully piercing revenge. They had attained a quality known as bravery—a quality that is only fear rising to a moment and effectively sneering at itself.

# BLACKGUARD

## CHAPTER XII.

Carl returned to the minor, suavely gesturing groups of hypocrites in the city in which he lived, and in going back to this "art and literary world" he had the feeling of one who had deserted a strong valley of desire to enter a stilted room filled with imitation orchids, valiantly empty words, and malice dressed in clumsy, velvet costumes. This reaction was still dominating him as he sat, one afternoon, in the office of a magazine called "Art and Life," perched upon a window-sill and looking down at the black and dwarfed confusion of a street.

This office was a gathering place for several young writers, each of whom fondled his pet rebellion against conservative standards, and they clustered around the anxiously seraphic face of Martha Apperson, the young editor, and seriously fought for the treason of her smiles. She was a tall, sturdily slender woman with a blithely symmetrical swerve to her body, and the natural pinkness of her face parted into the curves of a lightly distressed and virginal doll. Her blue-gray eyes

## BLACKGUARD

were looking at life with a startled incredulity—the gaze of one who has been tempted to regard a sometimes merry, but more often vaguely sorrowful picture-puzzle. Life to her was a rapidly taunting mixture of glints, hints, undertones, surface blooms, fleeting tints, portentous shadows with little shape to them, broken images, and misty heights, and she was forever trying to lure them all into a cohesive whole by striding from one philosophy and creed to another, adding another stride every three or four months. At such times she would appear at her office and enthusiastically assure her audience that she had finally accomplished the almost obscene miracle of penetrating the depths of human existence. She had started her magazine as a strident protest against “the people who live conventionally, steeped in a vicious comfort that binds their imaginations and ruins their legs and arms,” and its pages made an awkwardly weird combination of sophomoric revolts, longings for “beauty and splendor”—those easily bought thrones for the importance of youth—and enraged yelps against traditions and conventions, with here and there a more satirically detached note from Carl and two other men. Carl knew that he wanted her body because it was the only

## BLACKGUARD

mystery that she seemed to possess and because he wondered whether it might not be able to make her thoughts less obvious. Her mind was a stumbling jest to him and her jerkily volatile pretences of emotion failed to cleave him.

He began to turn his eyes impatiently toward the office door. Martha had left him in charge, promising to return in an hour, but he knew that her hours were frequently afternoons as she cavorted around the city, throwing out miniature whirlwinds of appeals for money and attention. In a corner of the office stood a huge photograph of her latest god—a middle-aged, hawk-faced lecturer from England—that fertile land from whence all lecturers flow—a man who had recently startled the city by speaking on Oscar Wilde, dressed in a black robe and standing in a chamber dimly disgraced by candles, incense, and muslin poppies. The theatrically savage features of this man rested beneath a framed letter from a prominent writer—one of those abortions in which the great man tells a small magazine that he earnestly hopes that it will amount to something and believes that it can accomplish a great purpose if it pursues the ideals which have illuminated his work. Carl's eyes sought this framed joke for the



## BLACKGUARD

hundredth time, since his mood needed such artificial humor to make it less aware of itself, and at this moment Martha came with the rapid gait of one who is returning to vast and uncompleted tasks, although her day's labors were at an end. This was not a pose but merely a bouncing overabundance of energy. With her was Helen Wilber, a young disciple who scarcely ever left her side. Helen had fled from a wealthy family in another city and traded her debutante's excuse for the more fanciful robe of an ecstatic pilgrim starting to ascend from the base of veiled mountains of expression. She darted about on errands and interviews and felt the humble fervors of a novice—a tall, heavy girl with a long, soberly undeveloped face and abruptly turned features that were garlanded with freckles. She had made a fine art of her determination to persuade herself that she was masculine, giving it the intense paraphernalia of stolen words and gestures, but beneath her dubiously mannish attire and desperately swinging limbs the desires of an average woman were feebly questioning the validity of her days. She greeted Carl with her usual ringing assumption of boyishness.

“Hello, old top! Been waiting long?”

## BLACKGUARD

"Not as long as I expected to wait, considering Martha's superb indifference to the impudence of time. Well, Martha, how have you been insulting actualities—with your usual crescendoes of insanity?"

Martha reached for the device of quickly sliding the tip of her tongue over her upper lip, a movement that always gave its opiate to her embarrassment or dismay, and then smiled with a softly tragic aloofness.

"Oh, people weary me so!" she said. "They're so impossible most of the time and so sublimely unaware of that fact! I've just come from seeing an elderly woman who said that she might be interested in helping us. She was fat and expensively gowned and she wanted to know whether we wouldn't print a story about the historical old families of this city and how they had founded a great, commercial and romantic fabric. I told her that we were concerned with the restless and flaming present, with the artists and thinkers of our own time, and not with respectable tradespeople of the past. Of course I put it as nicely as I could but she flew into a temper and said I was insulting the people who had built up a great and mighty city. . . O people are so impossible!"

## BLACKGUARD

Carl envied the excited flow of her words and wished that he could also feverishly felicitate his emptiness at that particular moment.

"I felt like telling her that men who've made money and put up ugly buildings aren't necessarily important enough to talk about," said Helen, with a hollow seriousness, "but of course I didn't for fear of hurting Mart's chances."

"I get so tired of wasting words on people who lead monotonous lives and can't see the variety and beauty within life," said Martha. "When you talk to them they treat you as though you were a little, misbehaving girl who would soon be spanked and put to bed. 'O you'll soon get over all of this artistic nonsense,' they say."

"Ah, they can't see that a defiance like yours, Mart, is a fire that only grows stronger when someone tries to put it out," said Helen with a spontaneously rhetorical worship.

Carl grinned at the dramatic sincerity with which these two women lunged at colossal targets.

"What's all of this endless stuff about beauty?" he asked. "Beauty, beauty, I'm tired of the label. No specific description but just a nice, sonorous word. You might exalt your loves and punish your aversions with a little more clarity."

## BLACKGUARD

"O you can't diagram it as though it were a problem in mathematics!" cried Martha. "It's too big and mysterious for that. You simply know it when you see it. It quickens your breath and drops like music upon your soul. It's the thing that makes you know that you have a soul—the radiant weariness that springs from everything that is strong, and lonely, and delicate, and elusive, and tortured."

"The adjectives are stirring and the fact that they happen to be meaningless is of little importance," said Carl. "I like the way in which you make love to your emotions."

Martha gave a grimace of exasperation.

"You're the most insincere man I know," she said. "Some day I'll fall in love with a man who can be sincerely brilliant and beautiful and who doesn't put his words together carefully, as though they were unimportant toys."

"Such a fate may be exactly what you deserve," said Carl, still grinning.

"Here we've been tramping around all day, seeing stupid people, and you waste Mart's time with your old arguments about beauty and words," said Helen with a jocose disgust. "I'm getting famished. Let's go home."

## BLACKGUARD

"I forgot to tell you, Carl—I'm having a party at the apartment this evening," said Martha. "That strange, interesting Russian you met yesterday is coming—Alfred Kone. And Jarvin who runs the literary page on the Dispatch. You'll come with us now, won't you?"

"Yes, I'm interested in Kone. He carries a certain revolving electricity around with him. His words and gestures are abruptly flashing like showers of sparks. I'm almost tempted to find out where the sparks come from."

"He's a natural pagan," said Martha with an admiring sigh. "Don't you love that European air about him! It's something that you wouldn't like if you could put your finger on it—something elusive and graceful, and sophisticated."

"Is it possible that you mean that Kone is intricately redundant?" said Carl, carelessly.

"Carl, you always talk in such a careful, un-earthly way," said Helen, with a combat of irritation and wonder in her voice.

"With most people talk is a weak, thin wine," said Carl. "They drink endless cups of it and at last they become mildly intoxicated. I prefer to achieve drunkenness with less effort."

The incongruous love-song of the conversation

## BLACKGUARD

continued as they departed for the Apperson apartment. Carl became morbidly jovial as though striving to goad himself into a mood, but underneath his words he was sad as he side-stepped Helen's heavy lunges. "I have never actually had youth—that glistening mixture of blunders, sighs, cruel laughters, and a pleasant sadness that does not cut too deeply," he said to himself as he listened to the obviously proud youth of the two women.

## BLACKGUARD

### CHAPTER XIII.

Kone had already arrived at the apartment and was waiting on the front porch. His heavy body, of medium height, held the arrogant bulge of muscles beneath his light grey suit and his pale brown face cradled a wraith of bitter alertness—a sneer attempting to break through the concealing flesh. He had a short flattened nose, thick lips, and the eyes of a forced and sprightly demon, and the dark abundance of his eyebrows receded into a low forehead, which in turn ended in a mass of black hair brushed backward. He had come to America some six years before this late Autumn evening; had first worked as a porter in a department store; had mastered English with a miraculous speed; and was now studying at a neighboring university and earning a living by teaching Russian to classes of children. In place of that violently disguised boredom commonly known as a heart he seemed to have an over-perfect dynamo that made him a mechanical wild-man—there was a sharp, strained persistency in all of his movements and the fact that he never

## BLACKGUARD

deigned to falter in his words and gestures gave him an aspect of well-maintained artificiality. He threw his vivid grin to Carl.

"Hah, poet who seems to sleep but is always awake—greetings," he called out, in the crisply dramatic way in which he usually spoke. "'Demons lurk in your dimples'—you should have written that line about yourself."

"Portraits are merely pretexts—secret portraits of oneself tortuously extracted from the blankness of other people," said Carl.

"You would like to believe that. The involved egoism of youth!"

"It might be proving your case to answer you," said Carl, laughing.

Kone was one of the few men who could make him laugh, since he had the odd habit of laughing only in praise and scarcely ever in derision—a custom born in the loneliness of his former years. Kone greeted Martha, who came in later, with words in which an adroitly raised respect and daring sensuality were carefully mixed, but, although her surface was flattered by his obeisance, his attentions failed to penetrate her radiant self-immersion. That would have been a feat worthy of century-old preservation. She listened,



## BLACKGUARD

like a convinced and mysterious referee, while Kone and Carl indulged in the precise uselessness of argument—a discussion on whether Dostoevsky was an insane mystic, drunk with the details of reality, or an emotional search-light stopping at the edge of the world. The talk led to a question of the exact value of originality.

“So, you are looking for originality,” said Kone with a metallic mockery in his voice. “A man may stand on his head without in any way disturbing the universe. Has it not occurred to you that life is only a series of reiterations beneath the transparent gowns of egoism?”

“I prefer the gowns when they are a little less transparent. I might also have to know why a man was standing on his head before I could make any conjecture concerning the agitation of the universe”—an amused respect was in Carl’s voice. He liked the stilted lunges of Kone.

Helen appeared in the doorway.

“Put your daggers aside for a while and come to dinner,” she said, with the most benign of tolerances.

After the meal Arthur Jarvin, the critic, arrived with a woman named Edith Colson. Jarvin was almost tall—one of many “almosts” composing

## BLACKGUARD

his entirety—and the plump old rose oval of his face showed its immense self-satisfaction beneath a fluffy mat of dark brown hair. He wore spectacles and his features bore the petulant satisfaction of one who has eaten too much for breakfast and has not quite decided whether to regret that fact or not. Since he held a contempt for the mad limitations of time he always fondly lengthened the utterance of his many “howevers” and “notwithstanding.” His friend, Edith Colson, was a tall, slender woman who freed a satirical vivacity with each of her words, thus making one regret the fact that she had nothing to say. One felt that to herself she was intrenched upon modest but well-guarded hill-tops of emotion; that, being thinly perverse, she had purchased her castles in Norway and scorned the more treacherous animations of a warmer climate. Her icy effervescences—whirls of powdered snows—sometimes subsided to a softer note which told you that the dab of warmth left within her was reserved for a select two or three beings, and that her conversation was an elaborate form of repentance. Outwardly she offered the effect of a carefully ornamented self-protection. The greenish brown length of her face accepted the problems of a long straight

## BLACKGUARD

nose, loosely thin lips, and large black eyes, and was topped by a disciplined wealth of brownish black hair.

They sat in a circle on the porch and the conversation skipped with too much ease between recent books, plays, and local celebrities among writers and artists. Jarvin, full of the books that had come to him for reviewing purposes, compared and dissected them with the air of a professor who boredly but genially lectures to his special class. "This book was passable: of course it couldn't come up to so-and-so's book. This other one—well, not quite as good as his last novel. A little too much of one style, you know. That new Frenchman? Yes, they're raising quite a fuss over him. Grim, cruel stuff, but well done. Those books lose a lot in the translations, though. That new poet? Mm, he's lyrical enough but he just misses inspiration. The new crop will have to go a long way before they can approach Shelley or Wordsworth. Have you seen the new Shaw play at the Olympic? After all, Shaw is one of the few men who can make you laugh without being vulgar or obvious," etc.

Carl sat in silence and rearranged, in his head, the difficult line of a new poem, and to his im-

## BLACKGUARD

mersion the conversation had become a slightly irritating and well-memorized murmur. Endlessly he muttered to himself: "your face is stencilled with a pensiveness. . . . pensiveness . . . but I need another adjective."

Kone ruffled the dulcet informations of the others now and then with a polite but ironical jest that was never too obviously at their expense; Martha preserved her eagerly listening silence; and Helen sat like a dazed woman at a verbal banquet, scarcely daring to touch the glittering food in front of her. Finally Jarvin found Carl's direction with a question that jerked him back to the gathering although the exact words eluded him.

"What were you saying? I haven't been listening," said Carl.

"That's an insulting confession" — Edith Colson's voice snapped like a succession of breaking wires. "Aren't you interested in books?"

"Well, not in the broad and detailed way in which they seem to interest the rest of you," said Carl, with the sleepily candid smile which usually made another person long to investigate the resiliency of his throat. "Once every five months I read one that should be spoken of with great vehemence and then gradually forgotten, but that's a rare occurrence."

## BLACKGUARD

"O come, that's an easy, superior attitude," said Jarvin. "Come down to the valley and join us, Mr. Poet!"

"All right, I'm down. I've passed your hills of judicial comment and reached the moonlight on the street pavement outside. It suggests a contest. Suppose we all make up a line describing the moonlight on the street—the moonlight that falls like a quiet silver derision on all philosophies—and we'll see which of us is best acquainted with the penitent promise of words. I'll begin. "The moonlight repressed the grey street, like a phantom virtue." Only original lines—nothing from books."

"Here I am in the midst of a talk on Bergson, and this young poet asks me to make up some pretty lines about the moon," said Jarvin, in a voice of poised scorn. "I read enough about the moon in the flood of mushy poetry that pours into my office."

"You might try to describe it yourself," said Carl. "In that way you could provide an excellent antidote for your disgust. It is, I assure you, an important task to rescue the moon from the rape of trite words."

"No, I'll leave that to minor poets," said Jarvin.

## BLACKGUARD

Carl gave him the malicious grin of one who is enjoying a sham battle.

"If the moon doesn't satisfy you, Mr. Jarvin, let's try that whispering prison of trees just outside of this window, or the people who place their unsearching feet upon streets every day. Anything except voluble shop-talk about the latest mediocrities with now and then a philosopher or scientist thrown in for purposes of repentance and caution."

"Well, our young iconoclast even scorns philosophy," said Jarvin. "Perhaps it speaks with too much thought and authority to suit your fancy. It's much easier to let your emotions juggle words."

"Philosophy is a bottle-faced dwarf drowning with imposing howls in an ocean that does not see him," said Carl, with a languid lack of interest. "But philosophy should be read, if only with a careful indifference."

Jarvin threw another rock, with haste, and Carl gave him another epigram. Kone, always a restive audience, interposed.

"The anarchist, Pearlman, has just come to town," he said. "Perhaps all of you know that he served twenty years in prison for attempting to kill a millionaire. A cruel penance!"

## BLACKGUARD

"I become rather tired of these anarchists who are forever trying and plotting to blow up the city-hall," said Edith. "They're neither artists nor dull, useful citizens and they serve no purpose that I can see. If they imagine that they can change the present system of things by shrieking and murdering people they ought to be sent to a school for the feeble-minded."

"I'm not so sure that I'd want to see things radically changed," said Jarvin. "Of course I know that there's a great deal of graft and injustice everywhere but I'm not sure that I'd care to live in a Utopia—wickedness and cruelty are far more interesting."

"The trouble with these anarchists and socialists is that they miss all the beauty in life," said Martha. "If you show them a painting or a poem they think that you're trying to waste their time, unless it contains a social message."

"I think that it's cruel and useless to try to take another man's life," said Helen, earnestly. "I hate this fellow, Pearlman!"

Kone listened to this stagnant symposium of viewpoints, with a patient sneer.

"In Russia we are more accustomed to murder," he said. "We have not attained the—what shall I

## BLACKGUARD

say?—the genial and practical compromises of your American democracy. In our country, alas, oppression takes off its mask and swings a red sword! If you will realize that death does not hold for us the mysterious terror that it holds for you it may help you to understand Pearlman. He came to this country—a young Russian—sentimental, idealistic, crowded with naive longings for martyrdom. He wanted to die for the people—that grand, massive, mysterious, and yet near and real people! When he tried to kill a millionaire, who was stubbornly refusing to arbitrate with his striking men, Pearlman was choked with a poem of liberation that could not be denied. Then the icy reality of his next twenty years—condemned by both society and the strikers whom he had tried to help, surrounded by the rigid leer of iron bars; and squeezed into a niche of futility . . . This crucified Russian does not need your sarcasm, my friends.”

The conversation staggered and scampered for another hour, with everyone save Carl animatedly endeavoring to conceal the fact that he was in no way interested in anyone’s opinions except his own, and at last the party packed away its comedies, irritations, and convictions, and arose from



## BLACKGUARD

the chairs. There were farewells, with just the right compound of gaiety and caution, and the gathering separated.

Carl and Alfred Kone went to the latter's room in a dormitory at the university and sat until an early hour of the morning, arguing with an intensity that made their tobacco smoke seem a cloud of gunpowder. Kone was that tense incongruity—an ironical sentimentalist. Within him, emotion cajoled thought to a softer brutality and thought intruded its staccato, exploring note upon the limpid abandon of emotion. A deliberate friendship rose between these men, like a translucent wall through which men can see each other without touching, for each one knew that the other held a baffling insincerity of imagination and was afraid that he might be deftly ridiculed if he failed to measure his words. Kone admired the nimble restlessness of Carl, a quality which he was compelled mechanically to imitate, while Carl liked the explosive way in which Kone evaded himself. Kone was now almost thirty years old but his machine-like capering made him seem much younger and he bounded through life like a sophisticated street-urchin, swindling himself with fiercely endurable makeshifts in place of dead

## BLACKGUARD

dreams. His tragedy rested in the fact that he was not a creator and the knowledge of this was to him a secret poison from which he had to escape with many a gale of make-believe laughter.

## BLACKGUARD

### CHAPTER XIV.

One afternoon, four months after the Apperson party, Carl, Kone, and Jenesco, a Roumanian painter, sat in the latter's little blending of studio and bedroom and looked at a landscape which he had just finished. Jenesco's eyes lazily flirted with triumph and his small, ruddy face displayed the expression of a child throwing a few last, unnecessary grains upon a sand-hill.

"Boys, what do you think of it?" he asked in a tone of confident fatherhood.

Kone and Carl scanned the painting. It was a mother-goose transfiguration, too quick in its acceptance of violent colors and bearing a blandly forced simplicity. Red, indigo, and orange trees were lining both sides of a road, and the trees were painted in such a manner that they seemed to be kneeling at the roadside. In the distance white mountains, resembling the suggestion of upturned cups, refused the blue wine of sky, and in front of them were fields that looked like wrinkled, green tablecloths spread out to dry. In

## BLACKGUARD

the sky one large pink cloud forlornly squandered its innocence.

“Pleasant—pleasant,” said Kone. “Not realistic, and not fantastic. It deceives both of its mistresses.”

“You don’t see what I’m trying to get at,” answered Jenesco. “I’m trying to make reality turn an amiable somersault, as Carl would say. I want to avoid the two extremes of painting the usual photograph on the one hand and making something that no one can understand on the other.”

Carl listened to the seething argument that followed, with the feelings of one who hears an exquisitely worthless routine of sound. He was always amazed at the fact that people could argue about art—a word pilfered from that last desperate undulation with which an ego decorates the slavery of mud. Arguments on art to him were like the antics of a sign-painter defending the precious label which he has painted upon certain of the more indiscreet and impossible longings within him—a piece of inflexible nonsense. He felt that works of art so-called could be described and admired with a novel and independently creative bow of words, but never defended and explained. Books on art were to him a futile and

## BLACKGUARD

microscopical attempt to inject logic into a decorative curiosity. As he listened to the wrestling sounds of the present argument, words within him began to flatter his indifference.

"While Kone is talking, Jenesco sits, trying to frame his reply and paying little heed to Kone's words," he said to himself. "If Jenesco hears a point that he has not previously considered he will make a hasty attempt to shift his answer—a quick sword-thrust at the new opponent—and then proceed to forget about the matter. Serious arguments might be of value if they were not windy and elaborate. If men could decide to condense their views into neat typewritten sheets, carried in a coat pocket and distributed among people, they could save a great deal of cheated energy."

"The poet has been sitting here like an amused statue," said Kone, after the argument had collapsed to the usual stand still. "Come, we are waiting for you to flay us."

"Splendid. Another tense battle. Haven't you had enough?" said Carl. "I would suggest that we hold a debate on whether that spider on the wall will crawl into the sunlight near the window, or whether it will remain in the shade. In this way we can speculate upon how much the laws of

## BLACKGUARD

chance may alter the spider's conception of the universe."

"Get away with that satirical pose!" cried Jenesco.

Carl smiled without answering, while the others derided his self-immersion. Jenesco knew no other weapon save an emotional club. He was a machinist who had taken up painting two years before this late winter afternoon and he still kept a little shop where he occasionally sold and repaired machines. This combination of rough mechanic and art-desiring man had given its surface lure to Carl's imagination and he had commenced to spend most of his time at Jenesco's home. Short, and with the body of a subdued, light-weight prize-fighter, Jenesco was a small hurricane of physical elations. He had the face of a corrupted cherub that had sold its innocence to mental inanities, and his mind was a conceited confusion of naive ideas. He had been attracted to painting because it brought his hands into motion, thus encouraging the habit which they could not forget after their working hours, and because it taught color and flexibility to the hard greys, browns, and blacks of his daily toil. He belonged to that band of men who spend a lifetime in stubbornly walking down

## BLACKGUARD

a road of artistic effort which does not lead them to any distinct surrender. Their imaginations are not weak enough to kneel before the drab regularities of life and not strong enough to escape from the instinctive push of dead men's realities.

From that afternoon on, Carl began to see more of Jenesco and less of Kone. Kone was not a creator but merely transposed, with a hungry fire, the sentences of other men, and after you solved the snapping tricks with which he did this, his ironies became thin and lamely transparent. Carl preferred the wolfish wit with which Jenesco, an ogling Proletarian, tore silk and satin from the shrinking flesh of obvious hypocrisies in life. It was at least a lurching circus of words—a pulsating buffoonery. He scarcely ever saw Martha now, since their self-immersions tended to create a sterile restraint between them, with words and hands playing the part of irrelevant intruders. Each of them secretly despised life and its people, while giving a pretended attention, but they used different methods. Martha fluttered her emotional veils, with a breathless coercion, while Carl dodged beneath a carnival of grotesquely mated words.

To amuse the secret loneliness which often became a boring acid he formed, with Jenesco, that

## BLACKGUARD

hollow melee known as a debating club; called it "The Questioners"—prodded by a ghost of humor—and exhibited his words in the formal vaudeville-show. The performances occurred at the studio of a man named Fyodor Murovitch, a young Polish sculptor with a softly melodramatic abundance of dark brown hair and the face of a strangely waspish saint—a saint who was tempting himself with malices in order to conquer them. One evening Carl sat in this place, drained by the empty ritual of responding to noisy and firmly convinced people and ogling his nerves with the rhythm of pipe smoke. He looked up and saw a woman—Olga Ramely—standing beside him. His eyes experimented with the eyes of this stranger and suddenly contracted. Her eyes seemed to be two drops of quivering sweat left behind by an emotional crucifixion. They were sensitive with essences. Greyish-green, larger than a dwindled sky, lost in a perilous dream of wakefulness, holding the phantom glow of incredible tortures, friendly to mental recklessness, they were like a ludicrously clever imitation of his own eyes and he trembled in the presence of an inexplicable deception. His imagination was becoming a detached devil much in need of correction. Olga Ramely spoke to him.



## BLACKGUARD

"I've been watching you all evening. The light from the candles over your head fell upon your yellow hair and put shadows on your face. The shadows gave your face a soft excuse and you looked half like a sprite and half like a martyr. There was an indelicately impish weariness on your face. Your hair was like light, and in one glistening attempt it tried to reach the weariness, but couldn't. I told myself that you were not the man that people say you are."

He made his peace with her eyes, moved by a profound embarrassment, and discovered the rest of her face, with an abject and yet faintly skeptical desire. The surface flattery of her words had been almost without meaning to him, but her voice had given him a problem—deep with an alto scheme, like a trailing memory of pain, and quivering rebelliously under the disciplines of thought. He examined her face for an affirmation of the voice. Short, dark brown curls encumbered her head, like a wig of lost thoughts undulating in an effort to capture reality, and her skin was the smoothly troubled fusion of white and brown. Her nose was of moderate length and curved slightly outward, in a subdued question of flesh; her lips were small and thin—pliant devices of

## BLACKGUARD

doubt—and a tight survival of plumpness upon her face told of a lucidly cherubic effect that had existed before life dropped its hands heavily upon her. Her body, verging on tallness, was immersed in a last skirmish with youth.

“What have you heard them say about me?” he asked, craving the evasion of words that would conceal a unique tumult within him.

“I’ve heard people say that you were a thief, and a rascal, and a disagreeable idiot, and a poseur, and a liar, and an overwhelming egoist.”

“What did you think of this dime-novel version of iniquity?”

“I have been, at times, partial to crude monsters, but your work was a curious contradiction. Why do they hate you?”

“Hatred is, of course, fear—fear wildly attempting to justify its presence. With most people this fear skulks within a harmless parade of adjectives, while others are compelled to fall back upon their hands. And so people commit actual murders while others slay their opponents in conversation. The former is apt to be a little more convincing than the latter, though.”

Carl spoke slowly, still correcting the turbulence of his mind with a plausible display of

## BLACKGUARD

words, and almost unconscious of what he was saying.

"You've left out a hatred for hypocrisy," said Olga, with the same abstracted indifference to words and the same instinctive cunning at piecing them together. "Some of the people who have been flaying you alive walked up to you to-night with outstretched hands and congratulations. And I felt the emotion of one too tired to have more than a twinge of disgust."

"It requires no effort to be stoical to this joke," said Carl. "The masks are too exquisitely futile to become interesting unless, indeed, they attain a moment of dextrous humor."

Jenesco and Murovitch, who had been disputing in a corner of the studio, walked over and offered a belated introduction.

"Sorry to interrupt love scene, but maybe you do not know names of each other," said Murovitch in his deliberate, shattered English. "Names tell people how much like nothing they are. But maybe both of you want to be somebody, in which case it is wise to pity you."

"You have a crudely spontaneous imagination—it spies love scenes and vacuums with a truly lumbering swiftness," said Carl, annoyed at the interruption.

## BLACK GUARD

Murovitch laughed—he had made a religion of giving and receiving heavy blows and it made an excellent screen for his inner timidities.

“I like your frankness. It reminds me of a heavy negro. It’s black and excited,” said Olga.

“Felman’s complexion is a little dirty itself,” said Murovitch, defiling his saint-like face with a prearranged grin.

As Carl and Olga walked to the studio where she was living with a woman friend, she told him some of the immediate facts of her life, as though clearing away an opaquely intruding rubbish.

“I’m working now as a waitress in a little cafeteria on Winthrop street. Eight in the morning to three in the afternoon. Two afternoons a week off. These burns on my hands come from the hot coffee. On the two afternoons I write poetry. My body, you see, passes into a less visible conduct, and thoughts rattle more effectively than china cups. Then, on the next morning, I am forced to recollect that life is in a continual conspiracy to prevent this transformation of manners. The plates are once more held up. Beans and roast beef refuse to betray the secret.”

They had reached the studio and were seated opposite to each other.

## B L A C K G U A R D

"And I work every morning in a tobacco shop," said Carl. "Since life works with ravishing incongruities, everything there should be burned except the cigars. Meditating on this, I am able to wait more peacefully on the customers. Cringing sounds slip from my lips. 'Yes, MacLane will win the next fight and the weather is terrible.' Strange, twisted little payments of sound. Life clinks them in his empty purse."

"Be romantic—make it the brave bow to an indelicate dream," said Olga.

"A background of colored compensations? They, too, are enduring if you don't turn your head too often."

The adventure of stealing from a cautious world to an alcove of unguarded expression changed their physical desires into brightly unheeded guests lurking just outside of their longing to talk to each other. When their hands touched at last, they laughed at the minute surprise tendered by their flesh. They became two secret isolations examining a velvet hallucination of fusion. Their bodies touched while investigating this enticing dream.

## BLACKGUARD

### CHAPTER XV.

The winter bickered with spring; days gave their imaginary separation of time; Olga and Carl stooped to the task of conjuring myriads of fancifully plausible tongues from their dream of perished identities lost in one search. Then Olga left with a theater company that was about to tour the middle west, having managed to secure the small part of a garrulous chambermaid, and Carl glided into a riot of writing, waiting for the telegram that would send him to join her in a far western city where her company would stage its last performances. In the meantime, he resolved to visit a wealthy uncle who lived in the south and wanted to see this "queer nephew of mine, who scribbles poetry and doesn't care about making money."

As he sat one morning in an elevated railroad coach, with valises at his side, commencing the journey to the city in which his uncle lived, his mood was glittering and aimless. He danced with outlines of Olga's words; hummed briskly saccharine tunes; and trifled with the contours of people

## BLACKGUARD

seated near him. Across the aisle a fatly rosy man was reading a newspaper and Carl's gaze idly struck the front page and absorbed the headlines. In a corner of the page he came to the words: "Actress Dies in M——."

His intuition, springing from that complaint vaguely known as metaphysical, changed his skin to a subtle frost and laid its squeezing pressure upon his eyes. The quick and heavy beat of his heart became frantically audible to his ears, like a gauntly terrifying horseman riding over him, and his mind changed to a loud confusion. He jumped across the aisle, tore the paper from the gaping man, and read that the woman whom he loved had instantly died after an accident. Assailed by an oblique rain of black claws, he tottered from the car, leaving his valises in the aisle. The black claws vanished; his heart and mind became extinct; and nothing remained save a body turned to ice and guided by instinct. Slowly, and with a brittle indecision in each step, he walked through the bickering brightness of one street after another, hearing and seeing nothing. He reached the bold flatness of the stone apartment building; read the delayed telegram held out by his mother, with the barest shiver of returning life, and dropped upon his bed.

## BLACK GUARD

Sunlight stood within the small room, like an emaciated patriarch entering through grey shades. Sunlight ignored the glossy chastities of furniture and dull yellow walls, and looked intently at the bed standing in one corner of the room. A long human collapse in black clothes stuck to the white bedspread. A blotch of blonde hair rested stilly in the weak light and hinted of a face. The body shook now and then as though an inquisitively alien hand were investigating its lifelessness. Then sobs pushed their way from the hidden face—an irregular orgy of distorted lyricism. It was as though a martyr were licking up the blood on his wounds and spitting it out in long gurgles of lunatic delight. The sobs were separated by rattling pauses that reminded one of a still living skeleton endlessly wrestling with death. The skeleton and the martyr sometimes felicitated each other upon their endurance, and short silences, like uneasy lies, glided from the hidden face. Then the bleeding turmoil once more streamed upon the air of the room, almost extinguishing the dim sunlight.

A peculiar species of happiness lurked beneath the weeping. Grief, hating itself, found a revengeful pleasure in attempting to tear and exhaust



## BLACKGUARD

itself into death. Sometimes the turmoil subsided to a light and sibilant fight for breath. The animal noise departed then and a small soul, much lighter than a phantom sin, plucked unavailingly at the mysterious spear that had suddenly coerced its breast. . . . The dark words of twilight finally entered the room, making an opera of the marred lyricism that escaped from the hidden face on the bed. Then night pardoned the deficiencies of the room and corrected them with moonlight, creating a tragic and chaste boudoir. Carl Felman felt emptied of all sound, and a mad craving for motion stabbed his limbs. He wanted to rush endlessly into space, barely supported by the breathless consolation of running after something that could never be caught. This would also be of great value to his heart, which was a stiffly smirking acrobat who has broken his legs but still strives to continue the act.

He leaped from the bed and seized his cap. His mother, who had been entering his room at intervals and vainly questioning him, stopped him at the outer doorway.

"Carl, where are you going?" she cried, in a sharply fearful voice.

## BLACKGUARD

With a hugely mechanical effort he managed to twist low sounds from his useless lips.

"Just—for a—walk—back—soon."

Without heeding her protests and questions, he fled down to the street. Human beings had disappeared, but he could see faces indented on the fronts of houses. One had a look of mangled suffering; another was studiously wicked, like a learned burglar; and a third bore the pathetic leer of a venturesome housemaid. He picked up these details, glanced at them a moment, and then threw them aside as though they were scandals from another planet. He passed into a region of three-story rooming-houses—flat wretches holding an air of patient cowardice. People surreptitiously filtered from the houses and walked down the street with Carl—chorus girls with plump, sneaky faces, underworld hoodlums with an air of wanly etched bravado, ponderously rollicking servant girls, clerks with the faces of genial mice, and meekly dazed old men stumping to their dish-washing jobs. To Carl they were also hurrying after something that had vanished and cajoling their mingled emptiness and pain with swift motion. Now and then he waved an arm to them in greeting, while an unearthly smile dug into

## BLACKGUARD

his face. His gesture, when observed, was taken for an intended blow and he left attitudes of fear and pugnacity behind him.

He crossed a bridge above a narrowly turbid river. The oily lights and toiling tug-boats were to him an inexplicable affront. Their stillness and slow motion insulted his passion for speed and with the spite of a child he looked down at his feet for a stone to throw at them. Finding a pavement block, he cast it into the river and rushed along, feeling for a second an exquisite relief. He passed into a crowded theater and business section. The strained melee of lights and noises became an intensely sympathetic audience, urging on his race, and the faces and forms of human beings met in an applauding confusion. With the cunning of a blind animal, he darted through their ranks and avoided collisions. Finally he reached another apartment-house region—large brick boxes without a vestige of expression. "The faces are gone!" he cried, with a gasping incredulity, as though inanimate things had alone become real to him. Moonlight, unable to fathom their petty baldness, clung to them with an attitude of limpid disgust. Thickly contented families, mild and tightly garnished, issued

## BLACKGUARD

from the doorways, trundling to some moving-picture show or ice-cream palace. An aspect of well-washed and hollow serenity protested against Carl's direct flight. Wrapped by this time in a warmly merciful daze, he did not detect the drably swaying counterfeit of happiness that would have awakened within him a maniacal response.

He sped down street after street like an inhuman hunter, and came to rows of wooden houses separated by large fields and blackguarded by the smoke of nearby factories and mills. An attitude of mildewed supplication—a beggar rising from ferns and mud—lifted itself over the scene. Rushing along, he plunged into the open country, where wild flowers, ditches, and fields of corn pungently conversed with moonlight in a language too simple and formless for human ears to catch. But Carl's ears had become inhuman, and he started a loud talk with the growing objects around him, revelling in their sympathy and advice. By this time his long, half-running walk had weakened him and he began to lurch over the soft earth of the road like a crushed and fantastic drunkard.

The ingenuous brilliance of a cloudless morning

## BLACKGUARD

stood hugely over the green fields and yellowish brown roads and an air of alert innocence went exploring between the flowers and ditches. Harriet Radler walked slowly down the country road on her way to the schoolhouse where she ruled a little band of demons, drudges, minor poets, and clowns. She lingered along the roadside, sometimes stooping to tear a tiger lily from the shallow ditch. Slender and short, a pliant virginity twined itself around her body. Her young face, pink and barely whipped, had been marked by a tentative sorrow and was hungering for the actual battle. Her black and white clothes lazily flirted with imps of morning air and were encouraged by her eyes.

Looking down at the ditch, she saw the half-concealed form of a man lying in the water, with his head and arms resting upon the bank. A tragedy of dry mud stamped its grey mosaic over his face. His blonde hair drooped with dirt like a trampled sunflower. The Pierrot-like hesitation of his features peeped beneath the dirt—a still and frightened ritual. With the horror of one who believes that she is beholding a dead man, Harriet knelt beside the figure and shook its head, her face turned away and her eyes tightly closed.

## BLACKGUARD

Then she heard a mingled rustle and splash and saw that the man was rising to his feet. He stood with bent knees over the mud of the ditch, his black clothes garlanded with slime, his face twitching into life beneath its stiff mask of earth. With a squeal of fright she scrambled to her feet and ran down the road. The man in the ditch, Carl Felman, felt that something was still evading him and once more experienced the hunter's frenzy that had tumbled him over the night. Gripped by a superhuman agility, he transcended his stiff joints and pursued her down the road. He caught her, his hands dropping upon her shoulders and whirling her around. She faced him with uplifted arms, a turbulence of fright and curiosity swiftly toying with her eyes and mouth. He lowered his hands and stood limply before her.

"Do you know what grief is?" he asked, in an almost indistinct voice.

She stared and did not answer.

"Do you know what grief is?" he asked, in a softly clear voice.

A look of loose wonder came to her face.

"Do you know what grief is?" he asked, in an almost loud voice.

A darkly smiling contemplation revised the lines of her face.

## BLACKGUARD

"Yes," she whispered.

Without another word they both walked down the country road together.



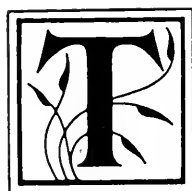


PART III  
INSTIGATION



# Instigation

## CHAPTER XVI.



HE train in which Carl was riding rolled slowly through the outskirts of a southern city and he looked out at the rows of negro cottages and hovels that plaintively cringed underneath the wide foliage of willow and magnolia trees. Most of the cottages were unpainted and grey with the impersonally chaste kiss of time, while the hovels were mere flimsy boxes covered with black tar paper. Sunflowers and morning glories stood amid the weeds and twined about the slanting fences like gaudy virgins dismayed at their sight of a lewdly disordered room and appealing to the sunlight for protection. Negro women in faded sunbonnets and wrappers could sometimes be seen shuffling down the thickly dusty roads and negro children, in weird incoherences of tattered clothes, tumbled around the humble doorsteps. The children were

## BLACKGUARD

little black madmen unconsciously dodging a huge fist that was concealed beneath the scene. The dust of a late August morning had dropped upon all things, sifting its listless sadness into every crevice and crack, and even the fierce sun could not dispel this invasion.

Every shade of this scene was an accurately friendly answer to Carl's mood and he squandered the brooding light of his eyes upon all of the visual details outside of the train window. The mask of careless bitterness upon his face said its hello to the cowering and sinister apathy of the houses and people, and viciously he longed to leap out of the window and join the unashamed animal rites which these hovels and human beings were parading. Here an alien race was standing amid clouds of evil-smelling squalor and staring at its broken longings and dreams—staring with a wild hopelessness. This race had lost its own civilization and was clumsily imitating that of the white man, not because of any innate desire, but because it had been forced to blend into its surroundings or perish, and Carl felt that all of his life had also been an animated lie of flesh and speech, devised to aid him in escaping from the contemptuous eyes that vastly hemmed him in.

## BLACKGUARD

And now, with the feelings of a man who had neatly murdered himself, he was planning to turn the knives of his thoughts and emotions upon other people, not for revenge, but because the marred ghost of himself harshly desired to convince itself that it was still alive. If this ghost had yielded to the subterfuges of kindness and gentleness it would have become too much aware of its own thin remoteness from life, and cruelty alone could induce it to believe that it was still welded to the actualities of existence.

As Carl sat at the window he could often hear the grotesquely quavering, boldly mellow laughter of negro men trudging to their work, but these sounds did not express humor to him. They held the strong effort of men to flee from tormenting longings and the numbly vicious rebuke of poverty, and the sounds which these men released merely symbolized the long strides of their fancied escape. Laughter can be merely the explosive sound with which human beings seek to demolish each other—the indirect weapon of self-hatred. Carl laughed with a strained loudness, throwing a magnified echo to the negroes on the dusty roads outside, and a drowsily plump, middle-aged woman in an opposite seat opened her mouth widely and

## BLACKGUARD

huddled into a corner, fearing that she might be attacked by a maniac. He gave her a glance and feasted upon her fear, for her shrinking attitude was falsely and deliciously persuading the ghost of himself that it still held a potency over other people.

Sometimes a song crazily drifted to Carl's ears from one of the negro cottages—a song that was weighted with loosely undulating sadness—and he listened with a stern greediness. Music is a huge, treacherous sound made by thoughts and emotions to console them for their feeling of minute mortality, and after it has given them its dream of permanent size it disappears, slaying the illusion with silence. Now it brought a delusion of substantiality to the ghost within the mould of Carl's flesh and he listened in a trance of gratitude. Lost in the obliterations of his grief, he felt infinitely nearer to these abject, musical negroes outside than to the artificially silent, stiffly satisfied white people with whom he was riding. Grief, which is an insane tyrant among emotions, has an effortless way of crossing all boundaries and walls, but it does not reveal any hidden oneness between human beings. Grief places men and women in a vacuum of renunciation, or shows them that they

## BLACKGUARD

have little connection with the people around them and that they have been enduring an alien camp. Ruled by this latter discovery, Carl looked with an undisguised hatred at the formal, complacent white people in the railway coach and felt that he was deeply related to the negroes outside.

Almost three months had passed since the invisible knife had swung into the middle of his being, and since he had staggered across the agitated sincerity of night to the peaceful compassion of the young school teacher. Now and then he remembered their silent walk down the sturdy brightness of the country road—a silence which had been a soft wreath ironically thrown upon the weakness of words—and the troubled way in which she had helped him brush his clothes and wash his face, and the stumbling simplicity of the words with which she had tried to comfort him. Although he had been a stranger to her, she had thrown aside that distrust which is born of sensual pride and a cheaply purchased worldly wisdom, influenced by the helpless directness of his demeanor and by the supple humility which a grief of her own had once left within her. The force of her fearlessness had fallen upon him like

## BLACKGUARD

the sweeping touch of another world, and in his daze he had actually believed that she had been sent by the woman whom he had lost as an alert messenger striving to teach him how to hold his ghostlike shoulders up beneath a future burden. If she had held a human aspect to him he would have hated and reviled her, for then she would have been merely an atom in the vast, turbid reality that had slowly lured him to an imbecilic torture. He accepted the curves of her body as an unearthly visitation and possessed them as one who passes through a fragile ritual. But after his departure from her, as he once more walked down the shaggy, solid country road, she had tiptoed away from him with a spectral quickness, and the clamor of a world had once more attacked him, like the scattered falsehoods of an idiot. The rustle of trees had become an insignificant whisper of defeat; the songs of birds had changed to the shrill vacuities with which a monster entertained himself; the colored groups of flowers had become the pitiful remains of a violated carnival; the earth beneath his feet had altered to the stolid aloofness of a giant moron; and the sunlight had seemed to be a theatrical accident.

When he had reached the city, with its orderly



## BLACKGUARD

ranks of houses and factories and its dully precise pavements, the scene had been to him a cunning mirage made by dying people to suppress their realization of the advancing destruction. The people on the streets had held the complicated glee and perplexity of an insane slave trying to extract an imaginary importance from his bondage. He had longed to jump at their throats and silence the feverish lie that was reviling the truthful stare of his eyes and only his physical exhaustion had prevented him from doing this. Grief is a spontaneous welcome sent to the insanity that lurks within all human beings, and its invitation greets a responsive strength or a frightened weakness of imagination, according to the man or woman who receives it.

And so he had plodded back to his home, carrying within him a numb confusion that was sometimes disrupted by vicious impulses, and forcing the ghost of himself into a motion which it could not understand. He had tried to answer the angry and uneasy questions of his parents with plausible lies at his own expense. Yes, he had met someone who had given him bad news and in a fit of temper he had rushed from the railroad station and deserted his valises. What

## BLACKGUARD

was in the telegram? Oh, just a message from a friend. Where had he been for the past two days? Why, he had gone on a spree and had slept off his drunkenness at the house of a friend. Shouldn't he be locked in an insane asylum? Yes, but life had already granted him that favor. With a glib tongue he tried to serenade the barren comedy of improbabilities to which he had returned, but he scarcely heard the words that he was uttering, and as he wrung them from the empty ghost that was within him he longed to strike his parents in the face and feed greedily upon their rage and astonishment, in an effort to convince himself that he was still substantially powerful, still able to assert his reality by injuring the people around him. With an act of this kind he could destroy the indifferent fantasy of life and change it to a tangible and active opponent. The man standing before him—his father—was merely an irritating puppet whose lack of understanding moved jerkily, governed by the hands of an ignorant dream.

With a cry of hatred, Carl struck his father in the face and watched him reel back against the wall of the dining-room with a feeling of warm triumph. He struck him again and revelled in

## BLACKGUARD

the blood that decorated the man's lips. His mother shrieked with fear; his father returned the blows; and the two men fought around the room, overturning chairs and vases. Several neighbors, brought by the cries of his mother, rushed in and overpowered him. Together with his father, they held him down while someone summoned a patrol wagon, and he was taken to a cell in a police station. As he sat in the flatly smelling semi-gloom of the cell he caressed, with an overpowering fondness, the blood that had stiffened upon parts of his face, for it mutely testified that he had conquered the remote lie around him and altered it to a satisfying enemy. He had persuaded himself that he was still alive, and the blows which he had given his father had been the first proof of this illusory emancipation. Throughout the night, as he shifted upon the iron shelf that was his bed, he muttered to himself at regular intervals, "I am alive, I am still alive," as though he were trying to preserve a triumphant dream that would soon disappear, and the grief within him rocked to and fro upon the words, using them as a cradle.

But when the morning dodged shamefacedly into his cell, bringing with it a faint retinue of

## BLACKGUARD

city sounds, the annoying fantasy returned with full vigor, and the ghost within him stealthily assumed possession of his flesh. Once more he was a thinly wounded spectator, filled with an impotent hatred at the melee about him and longing for the lusty release of physical motion. Two small boys, lying upon their stomachs, peered through the grating of his cell window, which stood on a level with the sidewalk outside, and jibed at him. He cursed them incessantly, with an anger that was not directed at them, but at the meaningless tensions of their voices, and with the tumult of his own voice he vainly strove to shake the wraith within him to firmer outlines.

As he stood before the magistrate a few hours later, an incredulous sneer was on his face, as though the man at the desk above him were a pompous, talkative scarecrow, and with a stubborn silence he confronted the questions that were thrown at him. In a low, hesitating voice his father declared that he feared that his son had become insane, and the judge ordered an examination by one of the city physicians. Carl was returned to his cell, after his parents had pelted him with half-angry and half-bewildered sentences in an ante-room of the court, and as he sat again

## BLACKGUARD

in his cell, surveying the rigid jeer of the iron bars, his hatred began to listen to the advice of cunning—a cunning pilfered from the wilted depths of his despair. He began to see that physical blows and silence were crude and ineffective weapons in his attack upon the insulting commotion of life and that, if he desired to injure human beings so that both he and they might become real for a moment, he must use more indirect and ingenious methods.

When the city physician, a tall, briskly-balanced man with no imagination, questioned him in his cell, he became a blandly appealing and submissive actor.

“Yes, doctor, I had a nervous breakdown from overstudy, you know, and for a time I’m afraid that I lost my reason. They tell me that I struck my father and this has horrified me, as I haven’t the slightest recollection of what I did. But I’ve gathered myself together now and I can promise you that I’ll never lose control of myself again—never! And I’m awfully sorry for what I did. I can assure you of the sincerity of my repentance.”

The physician was putty in Carl’s adroit hands—this composed young man with an intelligent,

## BLACKGUARD

contrite speech must, of course, be quite sane. Carl, as he spoke to this man, slowly formed an evil grin beneath the cool mask of his face, and he relished the task of showering upon this man earnest platitudes, smooth imitations of that limited sleep known as "common sense," and words of self-reproach, because this trickery brought back to him his old sense of power over his surroundings and offered a subtle outlet for his hatred of life. The physician ended by shaking his hand with a genial respect and when evening came he was given his freedom.

He returned to his home, repeating the soft treachery of his words while his fists still longed to lunge out at the faces in front of him, but the shrewdness of a ghost determined to regain a semblance of life by cleverly deceiving and punishing the people around it came to his rescue and controlled his body. His parents had felt wrathful at the presence of something which they could only dimly see and which he made no effort to clarify, but life had taught them to make a god of submission, and a heavy tenderness mingled with an alert fear crept into their posture toward him. He trudged back to the loquacious, coarse emptiness of his clerkship at the tobacco shop and shunned the world that he had previously

## BLACKGUARD

inhabited, for he feared that if he met anyone whom he knew he would feel again the irresistible inclination to interrogate their throats, and he knew that these impulses would only lead to his own destruction. When he accidentally met some acquaintance on the street, he would hurry on like a nervous criminal, ignoring the other's greetings.

He prowled about the city, still in search of a violent dream that could offer its delusion of reckless strength to the mutilated spirit whose complaints drove him on. He ran to the soiled raptures of prostitutes and sensually oppressed, adventurous girls who could be picked up on the streets, and gave them a twisted symphony of blows, curses, whispered insinuations, lies, while he revelled in the illusion of cruelty that was lending a false reality to the thin futilities of his mind and flesh. With a mixture of brutality and delicately simulated caresses, he overawed these women and they felt themselves in the presence of a charming, abstracted fiend, whose kaleidoscopic insincerity only made them long to change it to a gesture of actual love. He sought the company of thieves and hoodlums, and at first they distrusted him because his restrained man-

## BLACKGUARD

ners and gently removed look were not proper credentials, but when they saw how eager he was for the impact of fists, and how he could take a blow and rise with a grin of stunned delight, they accepted him as an eccentric brother. They did not know that these actions were not born of courage, but were caused by a gigantic longing for physical pain—pain that could shock his numb spirit into a feeling of sharply hideous communion with an actual world.

But finally this life began to weary him because it could not reach the flimsy loneliness that stood within him. He carried within him at all times an audience of ghostly thoughts and emotions, and they were at last becoming bored with the stolen melodrama. He determined to practice an economy in movements and words, and he walked alone at night and on streets where the possibility of meeting someone who knew him would be distant. He watched the syncopated gliding of people with the irritation of a stranger. The men and women who drifted or bobbed along were cardboard mannikins to him and he vainly tried to give life to their flatness and lack of color. Sometimes he would pause and touch his arm and face, wondering at the odd inadequateness of their



## BLACKGUARD

presence. Olga had become a living but invisible being who was constantly groping for him, with eyes unused to the outlines of earth, and sometimes finding his shoulder in a fleeting and accidental way. When this happened, he would turn around abruptly and berate his inability to extract her form from the concealing air. At such times he would often speak to her. "Olga . . . Olga . . . what is this unsought blindness that has come to both of us?" he would cry into the night air of a street. "A cruel chicanery . . . a blurred and simple pause . . . a little fantasy within a huge one? Am I a coward rolling in the mud that stretches before a vast gate? Life seems a fantastic conspiracy, panting and rattling in its efforts to hide the emptiness beneath it . . . Olga . . . take me to your burnished hermitage . . . I am tired."

He would walk on, trying to imagine what her answer had been, and winning an elusive and deliberately wrought consolation that stayed for an hour and then gradually departed. His life had settled into the recurrence of these reactions, when a second invitation arrived from his wealthy uncle in the southern city, and he had accepted merely because he wanted a new arena for his

## BLACKGUARD

struggle with a discredited reality—fresher targets and a change in the illusion's surface.

And now he was seated in the train that slowly rolled through the outskirts of a southern city and giving his eyes to the squalid negro section that unfurled before him. . . .

# BLACKGUARD

## CHAPTER XVII.

He turned from the window and strove to place an expression of close-lipped serenity on his face, for the train had almost reached the station. He had not seen his uncle for years and he played with dim memories of the man's appearance. When he walked down the station platform he found that his uncle, Doctor Max Edleman, was waiting just outside of the iron gates. Doctor Edleman was a man of sixty years, sturdily rotund, with a tall body that was beginning to be disgraced by its expanding paunch. His head was unusually large and ruled by small blue eyes and the sharply turned breadth of a nose. His great, thick lips were tightly withdrawn to an outline of benign patience and his florid face ridiculed the trace of wrinkles that had flicked it. His greyish blonde hair was still fairly abundant, and all of him suggested a man who was uniquely intact because he had scarcely ever allowed life to clutch him familiarly. Since he was an Alsatian Jew, he kissed Carl carefully on both cheeks, and

## BLACKGUARD

this annoyed Carl, not from the usual masculine reasons, but because he felt that this was a jocose insult from a fantasy that despised him, but he submitted with a flitting grimace.

He took Carl to an automobile and after they had been driven away he smothered him with questions.

"Your dear mother tells me that you have been acting queerly of late," he said, in the heavily-measured way of speaking he had. "You have been refusing to speak to anyone and staying away from home—bringing worry to your dear mother. It seems to me that you have given enough care and trouble to your parents, and that it's about time that you acted like a normal man. I understand that you have been dissipating and going with dissolute people. You are twenty-five now and there is no longer any excuse for this wildness. What have you to say for yourself?"

"Don't ask me to explain things that you couldn't understand," said Carl, returning to act in the falsely unpleasant play. "I have had a great grief and I'm trying in my own way to make it a friend of mine. If I tell you that your questions bring back wounds, I am sure that you will not desire to hurt me."

## BLACKGUARD

He gave his uncle words that would appease and disarm him, while at the same time evading his queries, and this game gave him a smooth semblance of life.

"So-o, so-o, I have no desire to penetrate your secrets," said Dr. Edleman, in a kindly voice that feebly strove to comprehend. "I am simply advising you to pull yourself together. Show some consideration for the people around you."

He continued to offer the benevolent adulterations of his advice, and as Carl listened he suddenly thought of a high-school teacher who had once rebuked him for bringing to class a theme entitled "Women Who Walk the Streets," and with a vaporously swinging amusement in his heart he almost felt human again. This fantasy could hold a blustering smirk now and then—its only extenuation. But the nearness vanished as his uncle's voice became a swindling monotone, angering him with its formal pretense of life. Carefully, and with a ghostlike insincerity that bribed his voice with lightness, he gave words that could hold this man at arm's length. The strain of adapting his words to the intelligence of the man beside him brought him a closer relation to the bickering phantasmagoria of men

## BLACKGUARD

and their motives without in any way summoning his own thoughts and emotions. Dr. Edleman felt that his nephew was skillfully attempting to defend a selfish past and bringing into the service of this motive a graceful keenness of mind, but beyond this point Carl's words were unable to affect him.

"I have always admired your brilliancy," he said, "and I only wish that you would use it in the right way. A young man must pay some attention to the desires and opinions of older people. It will be a glad day for me when I see that you are using your talents to bring happiness to other people. A glad day."

Carl gave a sigh to the grave dullness that marched forth in his uncle's voice and meditated upon the curious differences in sound with which people petted their limitations and discretions. These differences were known as words, and when they pleased a great number of people they were hailed as symbols of genius or power, but Carl could see no distinction between any of them. Like a horde of tired servants, they pranced to the prides and hatreds of men and then returned to their common grave, and only their exact

## BLACKGUARD

arrangement gave them a fitting assumption of life. "What is the difference between this old man and myself? Several keys to false doors of thought and emotion, misplaced or lost in his youth and found in mine." Through reiterating these plausibilities he tried to give bulk and texture to the fantasy of existence.

The automobile stopped before the Edleman home, which was a large two-story structure—a partial reproduction of the Colonial period modified to conform to the more exuberant inclinations of an Alsatian Jew. Four broad, high wooden pillars, painted white, rose over a wide veranda and ended in a slanting roof of black slate, and the walls were of red brick courted by an abundance of vines. A large garden, with tons of fruit trees and brilliant episodes of flowers, surrounded the house and was enclosed by a level hedge of shrubs and a low iron fence. An impression of dreamlessly cluttered luxury, verging in spots upon bland somnolence, proclaimed the empty heart of the place, but it was almost a distinct flattery to Carl, who had grown tired of aggressive angles and plain surfaces. Here, at least, the mirage held a sleek flirtation with bunches of color and burdened curves.

## BLACKGUARD

His aunt Bertha, a short, stout woman in a gown of brown taffeta and white lace, welcomed him in a babbling and languid fashion and showed him to his room. She was a softly shallow woman whose major interests were card parties and the lingering intricacies of gossip. The flabby roundness of her face was in the last grip of middle age and her mind was as scanty and precisely glistening as the greyish-brown hair that slanted back from her low forehead. After the dinner, she hurried off to the mildly mercenary rites of a bridge whist party and Carl was left to wander idly around the garden. He sat on the grass beneath a persimmon tree and played with lazy, cruel thoughts in which he slapped a man's face or tortured a woman's cheek, still moved by his old mania to profane the empty dream which life had become to him, forcing it into a vigorous duplicate of reality.

The bright afternoon, with its myriads of shrilly clear and hissing sounds, was like a troubled falsetto rapture and he weakly fought to bring it nearer to his senses. As he sat beneath the tree he resolved to give his mind some labor with which it could transform the vision to a more solid picture, and he thought of the people



## BLACKGUARD

who would soon be embarrassing him with their mouths and eyes. They were Jews of a kind that had rapidly spread over the south. The older people among them had migrated to the south some forty years previously and had gradually won large or comfortable fortunes by means of their thriftiness and trading abilities. They were now contented grand- and great-grand-parents, surrounded by two generations of their offspring, and all of them were strangely indifferent to the austere mysticism for which the Jewish race is so verbosely noted. Dreamless, voluble, self-assured, they angled with their religion in a half-hearted way and blackmailed, with money, the occasional flutters of mental curiosity. They had picked up several mannerisms of the south—softly drawling voices and unhurried movements—and the only things that distinguished them as Jews were the curved gusto of their faces and the fact that they mingled only with each other—a last, lukewarm trace of loyalty left by the surge of centuries of past incidents.

Carl went into the house and returned, with paper and pencil, to his station beneath the persimmon tree. He strove to write a poem to the woman whom he had lost. It was a torture that,

## BLACKGUARD

like a starved monster, devoured the softer spaces within his heart. It was as though he were endeavoring to compress the ruins of an entire world, making them narrower and narrower, more and more alive, until at last they formed the body of a woman. The effort brought him an actual physical pain; drops of sweat were born on his forehead, and his spirit reeled like a mesmerized, beaten drunkard. "All of life is a lie unless I make her appear on this paper," he cried aloud to the persimmon-tree leaves, for the lack of better gods. He detested his own futility and sought to avenge himself upon it. When the poem was finished he fell into a troubled, plundered sleep in which his consciousness busily made reports that were unheeded. He could still see the trees and flowers, but they were like the edge of the universe miraculously brought near to his eyes. Finally, with an effort like a straight line thrusting aside several worlds, he roused himself and read the poem. It failed to satisfy him; it was a tangle of treacherous promises and pleading fragments—the line of one of her arms, with an ashen delicateness; the nervously boyish rebuke of her eyes; the tenuous defiance of her heart; the curled merriments of her hair—frag-

## BLACKGUARD

ments fastened to a slip of white paper and lacking the great surge of breath that could have whirled them into a speaking whole. He had written other poems to her and they had produced the same result; but still, huddled under the tree, he continued to write, much like a dying man who has no choice save to gasp for breath, only in his case it was a ghost that struggled to avoid a second death. The ghost was seeking to escape a final extinction. He wrote until the lengthened shadow of the tree told him that he must return to the house; but it took him at least ten minutes before he could censure his face and control his breath. At last, with the thinly passive mask once more adjusted and held by the slenderest of threads, he walked from the garden.

At supper he met his cousin, Dr. Joseph Rosenstein, who was living at the Edleman home and who treated him with a suspecting affability. The presence of a poet is always a vague challenge to those people who feel that he is somehow at variance with the complacent finalities of their lives, but who cannot draw the difference into a clearer antagonism. For this reason they try to cover their distrust with a nervous and questioning amiability. After jovially advising Carl to

## BLACKGUARD

write a sonnet to a doctor, protesting to a great admiration for the prettiness of poetry, and asking Carl whether he didn't think that practical people were also of some use in the world, Rosenstein deserted the farce and began to discuss the technical details of an operation with Dr. Edleman. Bertha Edleman uttered some placid remarks concerning the possibility of Carl's writing short stories that would bring him a great deal of money; inquired after his parents in a detailed but listless way; and then, with more vigor, commenced to speak of engagements, marriages and divorces within her immediate circle. Dr. Edleman, by turns waggish and blunt, presided over the groups of corrupted words. Since Carl was anxious not to provoke these people, he stooped to the task of uttering pleasantly obvious remarks in a timid and deliberate fashion, and since they secretly felt that his work gave him a rank lower than theirs, they liked the subdued and abashed manner in which he spoke.

# BLACKGUARD

## CHAPTER XVIII.

After that evening he managed to protect his loneliness with clever words. He told the Edlemans that he was looking for material for short stories and that he intended to roam about the city; and, elated at his purpose, they did not object. Since most of his relatives were still displaying their dignity, jewelry, and card-playing abilities at northern summer resorts, he found it easy to be alone.

In the midst of his restless, empty wanderings he often sat for a while in a little park that rustled and nodded upon the top of a bluff overlooking a broad river. There he would stare out at the wide, yellowish-brown flat of water, and the dull green convolutions of the distant shore, and the water would become an ethereal canvas where he painted fugitive salutes to the woman who had fled from life's semblances. Under the spell of a melting daze he would sit for hours, almost unconscious of the fact that he held a body of slowly breathing flesh. At one end of

## BLACKGUARD

the park the line of benches turned sharply in toward the city, and this shaded place, guarded by bushes and trees, was known as "Rounder's Corner." It was frequented by thieves, drug peddlers, sly, lacquered women and an occasional vagrant, and they gathered there from twilight on and drained the fierce insincerities of conversation and whiskey, with sometimes the lucid edge of cocaine. Since Carl came to this spot only during the afternoons, he did not see these people until, one evening, he managed to absent himself from the Edleman home on the pretense of desiring a trip on a river steamboat, and strolled into the park.

He sat on a bench and looked around him, trying to become interested in the immediate contortions of the fantasy. One glance told him the identity of the social circle into which he had dropped and he felt a jerk of attention, for the more openly rough and cruel people in life were to him reflections of his ghostly self, spied in a coarsely exaggerated mirror but none the less valid. Fresh from the lazy inanities of the Edleman house, he felt a little baffled vigor—the ghost lamenting its lack of exercise—and he longed to roll once more in that plastic phenomenon which men insist on

## BLACKGUARD

calling mud. It was only through plastering himself with the concentrated moistness of earth that he could force himself to believe, for a time, in the reality of life, and he welcomed his chance to repeat this process. He scanned the whispering, laughing, loose-faced people around him and turned over in his mind different ways of approaching them, since he knew how easy it was to heap fuel upon their suspicions.

A woman dropped down beside him on the bench. She was young in actual years—not more than twenty-three—but her body had been slashed by a premature herald of middle age and her rounded face was too softly plump and wrinkled a little under the eyes and below the chin. Youth and age were stiffly twined about her in lines that protested against each other. Her body was short and held a slenderness that was unnaturally puffed a bit here and there, giving an impression of incongruous inflation rather than of solid flesh. Her black hair was a plentiful mass of artificial curls and pressed against a wide straw hat, festooned with tulips made of gaudy cloth, and she was clad in loosely white muslin with a crimson sash around her waist. The effect was that of a school girl playing the part of a street walker

## BLACKGUARD

in an amateur theatrical and, if you looked at her clothes alone, the illusion remained. It was only destroyed by a glance at her face, for the outward costumes of reality are often unconsciously amateurish, as though they were striving to obliterate the professional aspect held by the faces of human beings—a psychic confession. Men and women can never quite memorize their parts in life and their clothes sometimes express this absent-mindedness.

As he looked at this woman Carl noticed that her eyes were not those of the usual flesh trader—shifting and infantile—but were filled with a tense distraction. The mere sullen aftermath of whiskey, or the departure of a man? No, it almost seemed that she was actually brooding over emotions that had removed her leagues from the bench against which her body was pressed. Eyes are often unwitting traitors and they tell the truth more readily than the rest of the face, or words, since human beings are not so conscious of what their eyes are announcing. The two holes in the mask of the face are often transparent or careless admissions, while the remainder of the face is immersed in a more successful deception. Carl was interested



## BLACKGUARD

by the fact that this woman seemed to ignore his presence and was staring straight ahead of her. He began to believe that her indifference was genuine and he watched her more closely. Finally she tossed her head, with a gesture that expressed the defiant return of consciousness, and glanced at him. Then she threw him the usual "Hello, honey," and with a disgusted grimace he dismissed a certain ghostly audience within him, telling it that the play would not begin. For a while he spoke to her, throwing slang pebbles at her with an oppressed exactitude and brushing aside her lustreless insinuations, a little weary of the unconvincing comedy. Suddenly the stunt nauseated him and he fled back to his own metaphoric tongue.

"Do you see that woman passing by?" he asked. "She has a face half like a twitching mouse and half like a poised cat. I have known such women. They are continually robbing certain men of emotions in order meekly to hand back their thefts to other men. With a mixture of cruelty and weak submission they entertain their own emptiness."

He looked away from her, expecting a silence or the affront of cracked laughter and preparing

## BLACKGUARD

to leave. Her answer swung his head toward her.

"You may be speaking to such a woman. Life has undressed me to all people except myself, and I don't know what I am. I think that I was born to be a nun, but something kicked me down a dirty hallway and when I woke up there were many hands reaching for me and it didn't seem important to me whether they took me or not. But I think that I was born to be a nun. . . . Does that interest you?"

He stared at her with his mouth almost describing a perfect O and his eyes opened to a wild uncertainty. For a moment he felt that they were both quite dead and that her spirit had been ravished by waiting words.

"In God's name, what have you been doing?" he cried.

"Playing a part, with the assistance of your indifferent slang," she said.

"Why?"

"I started out by talking to you as I do to most men. You broke into a rough speech and I parried as usual. The evening was commencing in its usual convincing manner. Then I began to see that you were acting. There was a strain on your face, and sometimes you stopped in the

## BLACKGUARD

middle of a delicate simile. . . . I knew that I might be wrong, so I kept on talking as you expected me to talk."

On her face was the smile of a beggar whose tinselled metaphors have been pummeled and disheveled by surface realities. The plump curves of her face seemed to fit less snugly beneath the flat deceit of rouge.

"I am a fool," he said. "Your eyes told me something, but I spat upon it. I think that you had better leave me."

"I have no intention of leaving you," she said. They sat and stared at each other.

"Do you give yourself to different men every night?" he asked, as though his sophistication, in an instant curve, had retreated to an anxious child long concealed within him.

"I give them what they are able to take, and that is little. They want to clutch me for a time, but I don't feel them unless they stop my breathing. A man walks into a house, wipes his feet on the mat, spits into one of the cuspidors, and leaves with a vacant smile on his face."

"Why do you want them to come in?"

"They give me money for whiskey and leisure time in which I can read. I've never been able

## BLACKGUARD

to find a simpler way of getting these things."

The explanation was clear and delicate to him.

"Of course, the whiskey makes you sneer like a queen, and the books bring you affairs with better men," he said.

"All that I want to do is to pray to my thoughts with appropriate words, and every night until two in the morning I pay for the granting of this wish. . . . But I think that I was born to be a nun."

"I think that I was born to be a monk, covering the walls of his cell with little images, all of them contorting his bright hatred for a world," he said. "I think that something also kicked me into a mob of prattling marionettes, leaving me exposed to the shower of unintended blows. I have often looked behind me and vainly tried to see who this first enemy was, but I am afraid that he does not return until you die."

With their silence they continued the dialogue for a time.

"Have you a man who takes your money and kicks you?" he asked.

"No. Every now and then some dope peddler pays me a visit, but I have a gun and I know how to use it. I sent one of them to a hospital

## BLACKGUARD

once. They call me Crazy Georgie May and they're always afraid of something that they can't understand."

"I have a proposition to make to you," he said. "We'll live together without touching each other and each of us will be the monk and nun that he should have been. I am a ghost who wants to return to life and you are a living person who wants to go back to the ghost that was kicked into an insincere ritual of flesh. We'll erect a unique monastery of thought and emotion, and pay for it with the slavery of your hands or mine. . . . Will you live with me in this fashion?"

"Yes, if only to see whether it can be done," she answered instantly.

They rose from the bench and walked away together—a noble rascal and an ascetic prostitute.

*Typography and Printing by Printing Service Company, Chicago.*  
*Electrotyped by Simpson-Berans Company, Chicago.*

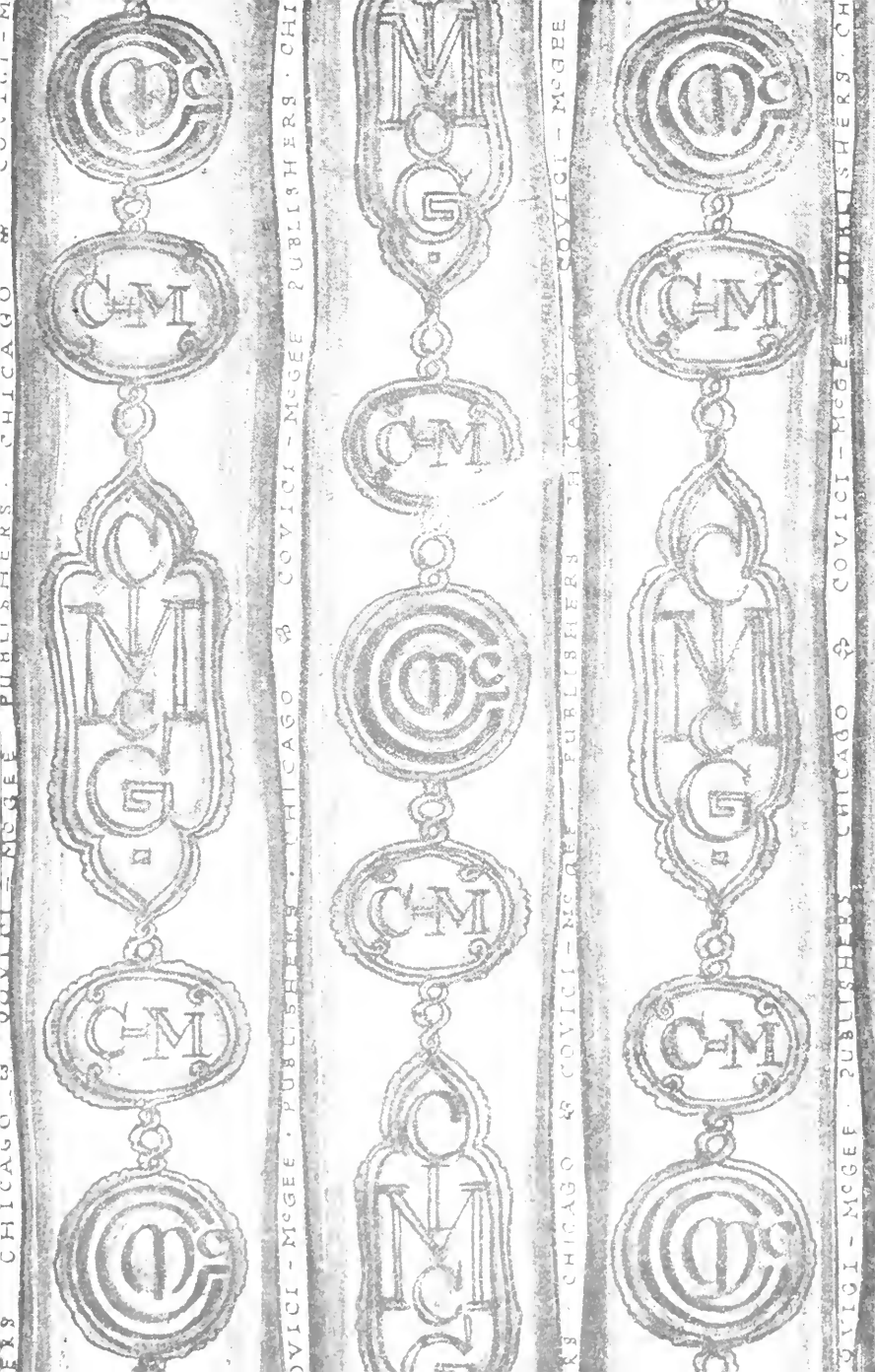
EL/IN

WILLIAMS & WILKINS, PUBLISHERS, BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

8 · CHICAGO & COVIGI - MC GEE · PUBLISHERS · CHICAGO · COVIGI - MC GEE

VICI - MCGEE PUBLISHERS CHICAGO & COVICKI - MCGEE PUBLISHERS CHICAGO





UNIVERSITY OF N C AT CHAPEL HILL



00027888064